

The speed limits on Arkansas highways and interstates will soon be going up. But there are concerns it will lead to increase in accident fatalities, as KUAR news intern Phoebe Sanders reports.

News016 3:14

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To keep pace with neighboring states like Texas and Oklahoma, legislation from the Arkansas General Assembly passed last year permits Arkansans to drive at a maximum speed of 75 miles-per-hour instead of the current 70 on rural, four-lane sections of Interstates including I-30, I-40, I-530, and U.S. 67.

Shannon Newton, president of the Arkansas Trucking Association, says the influence of other states led to the increase in Arkansas.

Newton2_neighboring states “Pretty much everything East of us is still at 70 [mph], and everything West of us is at 75, and I think ... some of the pressure [for the increase] came from, ‘Well, Oklahoma and Texas are driving 75 mph, so why can’t we?... (fade under)”

But she notes that history shows an increase in speed limits will inevitably make the severity of crashes worse and lead to a higher overall fatality rate.

Newton 1 “If you look back to the last time Arkansas increased the speed limit ... it went from 65 to 70 mph in 1996, and the fatality rate increased by 9.4% over the 24 months following that increase ... It’s certainly a concern that the fatality rate and the crash severity rate will increase in Arkansas over the next 12 to 24 months as those speed limits go into effect, but ultimately it’s a public policy decision made by the legislature and has support of the public... (fade under).”

In April 2019, the legislature approved Act 784, which enabled this increase from 70 to 75 miles-per-hour. In cities, speed limits would rise to 65 or 70 miles per hour. The Arkansas Highway Commission last month gave final approval to the change, effective July 1st. But the state Department of Transportation says the new speed limits won’t take effect until the installation of new speed limit signs, which will likely be completed next month. Nick Chabarria, a spokesman for AAA, says there are benefits of an increased speed limit.

Chabarria 1 “It improves mobility; it keeps traffic flowing ... When traffic is moving and the roads are flowing, less people are having to merge and are able to maintain their speed, which is a factor in keeping crashes at a minimum ... steady speeds that follow the flow of traffic— with appropriate safety measures in place— allow for more people to be within the law ... (fade under)”

In the meantime, Bill Sadler, a spokesman for the Arkansas State Police, reminds drivers that troopers will be enforcing the current speed limits.

Bill Sadler A

15 other states in the U.S. have also raised their maximum speed limit to 75. Phoebe Sanders, KUAR News. (pause)
In Little Rock, I’m Phoebe Sanders.