Study: Nevada's rural roads not the safest place to be driving

By Anne Knowles, Nevada News Bureau

If you're spending Labor Day weekend in rural Nevada, beware. Drivers are more than twice as likely to die in a car crash on a rural road than on other roads throughout the state.

In 2009, the fatality rate on Nevada's rural roads was 2.33 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles traveled, compared to 0.98 deaths on other roads in the state, according to a report by TRIP, a Washington, D.C.-based group.

That statistic places Nevada 19th among all states. The state fared better than the nation as a whole, which had about three times as many fatalities on its rural roads.

The report, Rural Connections: Challenges and Opportunities in America's Heartland, blamed several factors.

"Inadequate roadway safety design, longer emergency vehicle response times and the higher speeds traveled on rural roads compared to urban roads are factors in the higher traffic fatality rate found on rural, non-Interstate routes," the report says.

Nationwide, head-on collisions occur more often on rural roads – 15 percent of multi-vehicle accidents versus 8 percent on other roads. Also, 34 percent of fatal crashes on rural roads involved cars or trucks leaving the road versus 21 percent on other roads. And vehicles attempting to negotiate curves on rural roads accounted for 23 percent of the accidents while curves were involved in about half that, or 12 percent, on other roads.

The report suggested improvements. Low-cost solutions include better signage and road markings, more lighting and guard rails, skid resistant surfaces and rumble strips along the center line and sides of roads. Moderate-cost improvements include adding turn lanes and median barriers, and higher-cost solutions cited are reducing the angle of curves, adding passing lanes or additional lanes and widening lanes.

According to the Nevada Department of Transportation, most fatal accidents on Nevada's rural roads involve single vehicles running off the road.

"Problem in Nevada is we have very wide open spaces," said Scott Magruder, public information officer for NDOT. "A lot of people fall asleep, or are on their cell phone, and they drift off the road."

To help combat that, NDOT has installed centerline rumble strips – grooving on the road that alerts drivers when they have drifted – on about 2,000 miles of road over the last several years, said Magruder.

Many drivers in fatalities are not wearing seat belts, he says, so it's also a matter of promoting safe driving rules.

"It's the three E's: enforcement, engineering and education," said Magruder.

Magruder thinks a new law that bars phone texting while driving will help, too.

Nevada fared better in other report categories. Only 2 percent of Nevada's rural roads were considered in poor condition while 26 percent were rated fair and 72 percent were judged to be good. At least one-fifth of the rural roads in a dozen states were deemed to be in poor condition.

Nevada also had one of the lowest numbers of fatalities with 73 deaths on rural roads and 243 on other roads for a total of

316 in 2009. Only nine other states and the District of Columbia had fewer road fatalities.