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New I-84 digital speed limit signs between La Grande and Baker City now fully activated

BAKER CITY, Ore. – Digital speed limit signs mounted over a thirty-mile stretch of Interstate 84 between Baker City and La Grande have replaced the standard speed signs in that area. The new signs will use traffic, road, weather and visibility sensors to lower the legal speed limit when ice, snow, fog or a wreck ahead requires everyone to slow down. Along with identifying the current legal speed limit, the digital displays can also show the reason for a reduced speed, such “ice” or “low visibility.”

The new variable speed limit signs were installed this summer and have displayed the current freeway speed limits for about two months. The signs are now connected to road sensor and fully functional. Drivers are reminded to watch for and obey these new digital speed signs, which will show the current legal speed limit for the area.

“The section of freeway between Baker City and La Grande is positioned between the Eagle Cap and Elkhorn mountain ranges,” said ODOT Area Manager Ken Patterson. “This often creates microclimates with more severe weather patterns than adjacent sections of freeway.”

Ice, high winds with blowing snow, and limited visibility are some of the challenging conditions that catch motorists off-guard, resulting in a higher number of crashes than similar freeway sections.

“The idea behind these new signs is to warn motorists ahead of hazardous road conditions and get them to slow down before they enter a potentially dangerous situation,” Patterson said.

Sensors talk sign-language

Roadside sensors that feed data into the variable speed limit sign system measure temperature, visibility, road surface grip (traction), vehicle speeds and moisture levels. No data is collected on individual vehicles, but if a majority of cars and trucks are slowing down due to weather, poor road conditions, or a wreck ahead, the sensors can send a message to the signs to reduce the speed for

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all drivers. Likewise, when sensors detect poor traction, low visibility or other hazardous conditions, speed limits will be lowered and an appropriate warning message can be displayed. ODOT staff will also be able to manually adjust the speed limits, such as when a crash occurs or when construction activities require a slower speed.

Three separate 10-mile stretches between Baker City and La Grande are each controlled by their own set of sensors. The system will adjust speed limits for those sectors that warrant slower travel. In some cases only one section will be impacted. In other cases two or even all three segments will see speed reductions.

“This is the first time in Oregon a speed limit sign system has been installed that can adjust the legal speed,” said Patterson. “Similar projects have been constructed in other states with positive results. Over the winter we will be monitoring our new system and making adjustments as needed.”

A second variable speed limit sign system is planned to be installed along a section of I-84 between La Grande and Pendleton in the next few years where snow, ice and dense fog create serious wintertime challenges.

The system will improve safety on I-84 where speed limits were increased last March along the interstate and about a dozen other eastern and central Oregon highway sections. Legal speeds increased to 70 mph for cars and 65 mph for trucks on portions of Interstate 84 and I-82, plus U.S. 95. A selection of other highways east of the Cascade Mountain Range increased to 65 mph for cars and 60 mph for trucks. The new higher speed limits are meant for dry, clear pavement and do not take into account the area’s challenging winter weather. All motorists are required by law to drive according to the conditions of the roadway. That means slowing down when ice, snow, fog or other hazards are encountered.

“The biggest problem we have in the winter is people driving too fast for conditions,” said Oregon State Police Sgt. Kyle Hove.

Knowledge is power, however, and these new signs will help increase drivers’ awareness of conditions.

“The goal of these projects is to reduce the number and severity of crashes in known trouble spots,” said Patterson. “It will save lives and limit the amount of time the freeway is closed due to a crash or severe weather conditions.”

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