

Feds to study rise in motorcycle deaths

David Shepardson / Detroit News Washington Bureau

Washington -- The Federal Highway Administration will conduct an intensive study into the cause of the growing number of motorcycle crashes and deaths on America's roads. It's the first study of its kind in almost 30 years.

Nearly 5,300 motorcycle riders died in roadway crashes in 2008, representing 14 percent of all deaths, and 96,000 were injured.

Between 1997 and 2008, motorcycle fatalities jumped from 2,116 to 5,290 -- a 150 percent increase, according to the Transportation Department's Fatality Analysis Reporting System.

In 2008 alone, deaths from motorcycle crashes rose by 2.2 percent while all other vehicle classes saw reductions in fatalities.

The problem isn't just because of more bikes on the roads.

The motorcycle fatality rate has nearly doubled from 21 per million miles traveled in 1997 to 39 in 2007.

The study was required by a 2005 federal law, the "Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act," and will be conducted along with the Oklahoma State University.

Researchers will evaluate data from hundreds of motorcycle crashes to help identify common factors, including road configurations, environmental conditions and rider experience.

The study's focus is on countermeasures that could reduce motorcycle crashes or lessen their harm.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration conducted a pilot study to develop the protocols for the full-scale causation research. NHTSA conducted the last major motorcycle causation study, which was completed in 1981.

"OSU is delighted to be the lead research institution for this important study," said Alan Tree, associate dean for research in Oklahoma State's College of Engineering, Architecture and Technology. "We expect very significant, scientifically valid results to emerge from this work and look forward to a very positive final outcome."

NHTSA said in July it was considering requiring new safety features on motorcycles.

The agency plans to decide by next year whether to require anti-lock brakes on motorcycles, spokesman Rae Tyson said.

An Insurance Institute for Highway Safety study showed that the rate of fatal crashes was 28 percent lower for motorcycles equipped with optional anti-lock brakes than for those same motorcycles without them.

In Michigan, motorcycle-related deaths remain a serious problem.

Motorcycle road deaths jumped from 6.8 percent of all traffic deaths in 2004 to 13 percent in 2008 -- from 79 deaths in 2004 to 127 last year. Motorcycle injuries rose from 2,679 in 2004 to 3,462 last year.

In June 2008, Gov. Jennifer Granholm again vetoed a bill to repeal the state's mandatory helmet law for motorcycle riders.