



Road Warrior: When gas tax rises, fatalities could fall

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RECORD COLUMNIST | THE RECORD
OCTOBER 12, 2016

With gas prices holding firm in the \$2-a-gallon range, it's not surprising that American motorists have been driving a lot more than usual. But as with many attractive benefits, there's an ugly side effect to logging more miles behind the wheel.

We're logging more traffic deaths, too: 47 more than by early last October in New Jersey, for an 11.4 percent increase so far, according to preliminary state police figures. And with the Christmas shopping season coming, this trend might worsen.

Or maybe not.

Starting Nov. 1, New Jersey's gas tax will rise by 23 cent a gallon after 28 years at the 14.5-cent level. If lower prices triggered more driving, which in turn triggered more deaths, is it likely that rising prices might at least stem some of the expected carnage for the rest of the year?

"It could, but nobody really knows for sure," said Gary Poedubicky, who heads the state Highway Traffic Safety Division.

Predicting road deaths can be as complicated as predicting economic trends or forecasting the weather. All you can do is study past trends.

"There are so many factors," said Richard Simon, regional director for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. "We have a general idea about how many vehicle miles people travel, but so much of it depends on personal economic factors and weather, which can vary from region to region. How can you predict the weather?"

December, for example, is one of the two deadliest months for road travel in New Jersey. From 2010 to 2014, the five-year road-death count reached 270, a figure matched only by July, when warm weather, vacations, Independence Day and alcohol traditionally affect road travel much as Christmas shopping and family gatherings do in December. And although vehicle miles traveled tend to decline late in the year, navigating the roads becomes more challenging as sunlight disappears earlier each day, noted Simon and Poedubicky.

"It's much easier to evaluate our assumptions retroactively," joked Simon.

That's usually impossible, of course. How can we make an early prediction about the impact of snowfall in December or the economy in November?

But this year, some of the economic impact won't be a surprise because, by state law, gasoline prices will rise more than 10 percent on Nov. 1 or thereabouts. Is that a sufficient disincentive to have an impact on road safety?

After all, people cut down on their driving after price spikes in the recent past.

According to Gas Buddy, a fuel-watchdog website, gas prices in New Jersey rose from \$2.80 a gallon in mid-2007 to \$3.99 by mid-2008. In that year, people reduced their driving. Estimated vehicle miles traveled dipped nearly 4 percent from 76 billion to 73.3 billion, and road fatalities slid from 724 to 590. Prices fluctuated after that, but vehicle miles never reached 76 billion again, although the figure reached 75.3 billion last year as prices finally dipped below \$2 a gallon.

But toward the end of 2015, fatal crashes began rising as before. Fatalities finished the year at 562, six more than the record low achieved in 2014 when prices were in the \$2.70 range. And in this year's \$2-a-gallon range, VMT seemed to be closing in on the 76 billion mark achieved nine years ago.

Meanwhile, fatalities have been rising month after month, to 458 as of Tuesday.

Might the 23-cent-a-gallon tax hike halt this 11.4 percent climb, or at least slow it down?

"I reject the whole premise," said Sal Risalvato, president of the New Jersey Gasoline and Convenience Store Automotive Association, which represents 1,500 gas stations. "People who were paying around \$2.50 a gallon last year aren't going to worry much about prices that will soon reach \$2.25. Trust me: Vehicle miles will continue to rise."

But Risalvato recognizes there is a limit to customer tolerance.

"If prices reach \$3 a gallon, you'll begin seeing strong resistance," he said, "and if it gets back to \$4 again, watch out!"

For his part, Poedubicky isn't counting on any perceived benefit from the gas tax hike.

"We'll be doing our usual seat-belt and drunk-driving enforcement programs as the holidays approach," he said, "and we'll be promoting safe driving on radio, television and road signs. Whatever the price of gas is, we have to continue to reinforce the importance of responsible behavior behind the wheel."

In April, his traffic safety division expects \$1.5 million to \$2 million in additional federal funding to expand distracted-driving enforcement and public-awareness programs. An additional \$650,000 in federal grants will be used to enhance similar programs designed to reduce the rising number of pedestrian and bicyclist injuries and fatalities, too.

Last year, walking deaths rose to 173, the most since 2002, and this year's pedestrian death count is on pace to equal that number. But in 2016, being behind the wheel — not walking on the street — appears to be much, much riskier than it was last year. According to preliminary state police figures, driver deaths rose more than 24 percent, to 258, meaning 49 more drivers have died this year so far on New Jersey roads compared with the 2015 figure of 209.

Can that deadly momentum be broken by December?

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