

DID YOU KNOW???

UTAH CONSIDERING .05 BAC LIMIT FOR DWI

Under calls that it will save lives, Utah legislators sent a bill to the House floor in February to make Utah's legal blood alcohol limit for driving the lowest in the nation. It was approved in March and will become law if the Governor, who says he supports the law, approves it. The Bill sponsor Rep. Norman Thurston, R-Provo, said reducing drivers' legal blood alcohol limit from .08 to .05 isn't intended to discourage Utahans from drinking, but convince them not to get behind the wheel if they do.

Upon approval, this law would take effect Dec. 30, 2018, allowing time to disseminate information about the change and implementing it in time for the New Year's Eve weekend. It would also make Utah the first state in the country to match what Thurston called an "international standard" for laws regarding drinking and driving.

In a March, 2009 "Did You Know" article, I wrote about how liberal DWI laws are in the US and Canada, where the DWI limit is .08, compared with the rest of the world. For instance, since 1990, Sweden's limit is .02. Even Russia has a limit of .02, and the majority of European countries have established a legal limit of no higher than .05.

Bella Dinh-Zarr, vice chairwoman of the National Traffic Safety Board, cited the success in dozens of European and Asian countries that lowered the legal alcohol limit for drivers and reduced the number of drunken driving fatalities. "Although people in those countries continue to drink more per capita than people in the U.S., there are fewer deaths on the roads," Dinh-Zarr said. "They drink more, and yet they die less because of a .05 BAC."

The National Transportation Safety Board has recommended lowering alcohol driving limits to .05 or lower since 2013, Dinh-Zarr said. If the standard was adopted nationwide, fatal alcohol crashes would drop by 11 percent, she said, or nearly 1,800 people each year.

The Utah proposal isn't without controversy, however. Speaking against the bill, Sean Druyon, a legislative committee member for the Utah Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, said lowering the legal driving limit for blood alcohol concentrations would lead to more people losing their licenses, which in turn leads to lost jobs and hardships for families.

Druyon said the bill fails to balance between individual freedoms and protecting the community. He also voiced concern about a potential impact to the state's tourism dollars if people choose not to come to Utah in light of the lower allowable drinking level. Additionally, many areas in the state, like Park City, don't have enough public transit to offer an alternative.

It will be interesting to follow the progress of this proposal, as societal attitudes toward drinking and driving have changed over the past 50 years. Still approximately 1/3 of all traffic crashes have alcohol as a factor, if not the direct cause.

Information on the Utah proposal was sent to me from the National Sheriffs' Association and Franklin County Sheriff Kevin Mulverhill. Thanks to both.

For more information on traffic law and safety, go to the traffic safety board's web site at: www.franklincony.org and click on "Traffic Safety Board".