

Pennsylvania testing 70-mph limit on parts of two interstates

July 24, 2014 8:40 AM

By Jon Schmitz and Kate Giammarise / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Pennsylvanians will save a few minutes on highways where the speed limit is raised to 70 mph but probably will pay a price in more crashes, injuries and fatalities, two safety advocates warned.

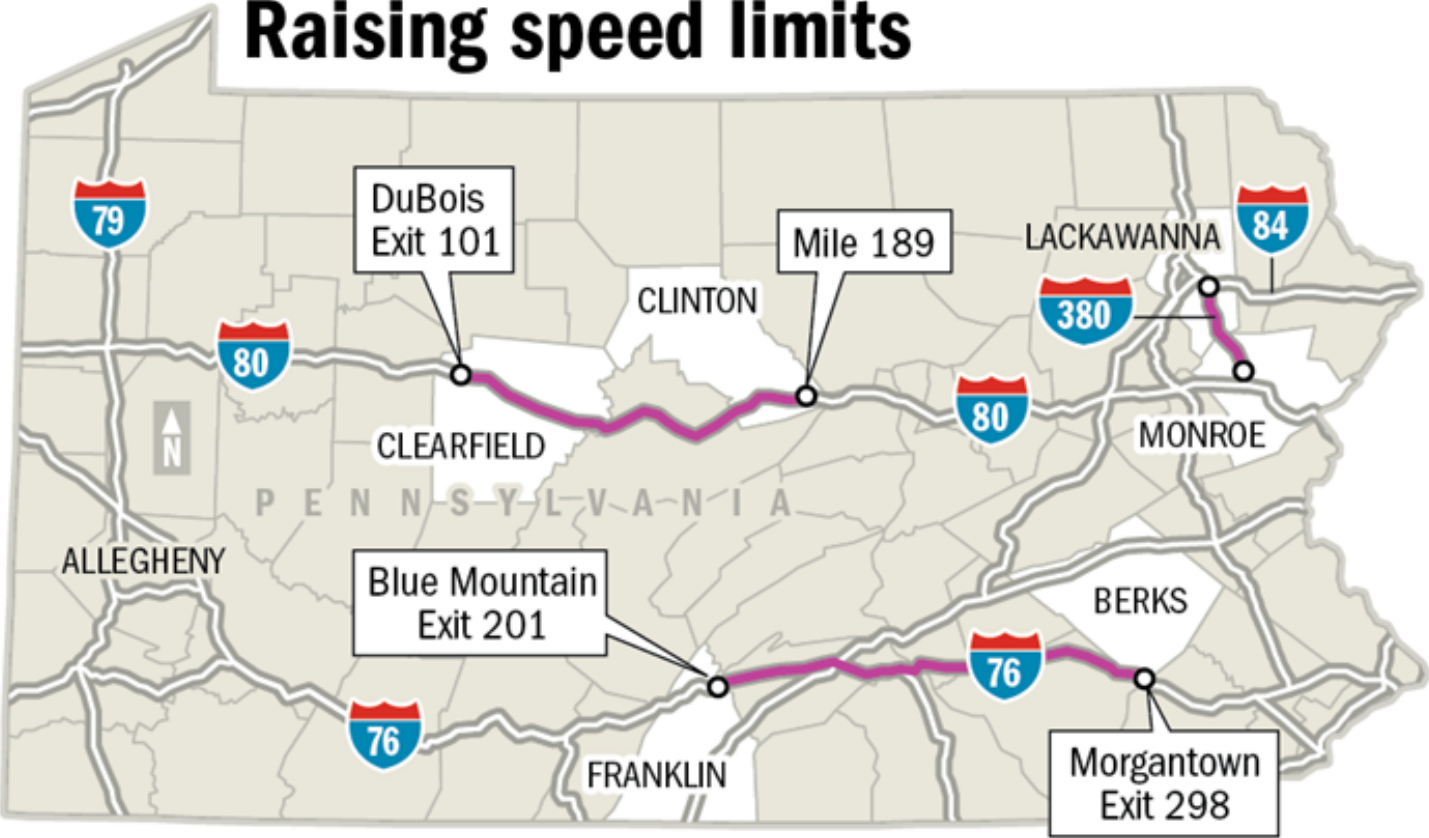
The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation on Wednesday announced plans to raise the limit from 65 mph to 70 on two stretches of interstate highways, in a pilot project that may lead to increases elsewhere. The higher limit will take effect around Aug. 11 on Interstate 80 from Du Bois in Clearfield County (Exit 101) to Clinton County (mile 189) and a 21-mile section of I-380 in Monroe and Lackawanna counties.

On Tuesday, the Pennsylvania Turnpike debuted a 70- mph limit from Blue Mountain (Exit 201) to Morgantown (Exit 298), also as a test for increasing the limit elsewhere on the 550 miles of toll roads it oversees.

Pennsylvania is the 38th state to have a speed limit of at least 70 mph. Ohio raised the limit to 70 on sections of six interstate highways last year and on its turnpike in 2011. West Virginia adopted a 70-mph limit in 1997.

“Raising speed limits is popular. It certainly gets people to their destinations faster. But there is always a safety trade-off,” said Russ Rader, senior vice president of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, based in Arlington, Va. “When speed limits go up, deaths on those roads follow suit and go up.”

Raising speed limits



Time saved by traveling 70 mph vs. 65 mph on the three highway segments where the new limits will be in effect:	ROUTE	MILES	MINUTES SAVED
	Turnpike	97	6.4
	I-80	88	5.8
	I-380	21	1.4

Source: PennDOT

James Hilston/Post-Gazette

Raising the speed limits

“The faster you go, the greater your chances of being injured or killed,” said Kara Macek, spokeswoman for the Governors Highway Safety Association in Washington, D.C. “The question is, is it worth it, the few minutes you’re going to shave off your travel time?”

By driving 70 mph rather than 65, a driver will save about six minutes on the 97-mile turnpike section and the 88-mile I-80 segment where the limits are being raised. On I-380, the time saved will be about a minute and a half.

But one of the problems is that many drivers will go even faster, knowing they are unlikely to be cited for adding a few extra mph to the limit, Mr. Rader said. “People will drive at the speed where they feel comfortable that they won’t get a ticket. In most places, that’s 5 to 10 mph above the limit,” he said.

“People think they have a little speed cushion, and by and large they do,” agreed Ms. Macek.

At a news conference in Middletown, Pa., where PennDOT announced the speed limit increase, state police Lt. Edward Murphy said officers using their speedometers to clock drivers can pull them over for being just 1 mph over the limit. With radar, a driver must be traveling 6 mph or more over the limit to be cited for speeding, he said.

“I would advise you that if you go over the speed limit, you may be cited,” he said.

Jim Runk, president of the Pennsylvania Motor Truck Association, said the organization did not take a position on higher speeds but said he was concerned about safety. Some large trucks have speed governors limiting them to 65 to 68 mph. Cars going faster than the new limit whose drivers aren’t paying attention, or whose vision is limited by bad weather or darkness, could ram the backs of the slower-moving trucks, he said.

The transportation funding law approved last fall by the Legislature and Gov. Tom Corbett raised the maximum speed limit to 70 mph.

The change was proposed by Senate President Pro Tempore Joe Scarnati, R-Jefferson, who called it “an economic issue — to keep Pennsylvania competitive.” The increased speed could mean “more efficient delivery of goods and services,” he said in a memo to colleagues.

Mr. Runk said that although truckers might save time by traveling faster, they also would burn more diesel fuel at 70 mph. “At six miles to a gallon, that would add up considerably,” he said.

Mr. Scarnati’s memo noted that the former maximum speed was set in 1995 and said “in the 18 years since that time automobiles have not only become more fuel efficient but technological advances have also led to better built vehicles which are far easier to handle and drive at increased speeds.”

Mr. Rader agreed that cars are built better but said crash testing is typically done at 35 or 40 mph. “Once you get up to these much higher speeds, the safety systems built into these modern vehicles can be overwhelmed,” he said.

A 2009 study published in the American Journal of Public Health found the 1995 repeal of the 55-mph national speed limit was followed by a 3 percent increase in fatalities attributable to higher speed limits on all road types and a 9 percent increase on rural interstates. The authors estimated more than 12,500 deaths were caused by higher speed limits from 1995 to 2005.

The Ohio Turnpike saw increases in crashes and injuries, but not fatalities, after it raised its limit to 70 mph, according to data from the Ohio Highway Patrol.

Crashes per 100 million miles traveled rose from 81.4 in the two years before the change to 88.4 in the two years after, an 8.6 percent increase. Injuries rose from 799 to 880, up 10.1 percent.

There were 16 fatalities in the two years before 70 mph was implemented and 15 in the two years after.

PennDOT Secretary Barry Schoch said the department will use data from the pilot tests “to determine where else the maximum speed could be increased.” With driving too fast for conditions being the leading cause of crashes, “the concern we have, as we move to 70 mph, is will it exacerbate that problem or not?”

Other speed limit increases could come next spring or summer after the evaluation is complete, he said.

Turnpike CEO Mark Compton said the faster turnpike section will be monitored for six to eight months before decisions are made to raise limits elsewhere. “If everything goes well, I’d expect the remainder of the turnpike will switch over to 70-mph speed where appropriate and safe next spring,” he said.

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First Published July 23, 2014 12:00 AM