

IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Drivers need to lower speed in work zones *all* the time

*National Work Zone Awareness Week is April 17 to 21.
The theme: "You play a role in work zone safety. Work with us."*

TOPEKA - With highway work picking up across Kansas this spring, motorists should be slowing down in work zones.

Highway work zones span the length of the construction area. The work zone begins with the Road Work Ahead sign and ends with the End Roadwork sign. Work zones are marked with additional signs, including a reduced speed limit. The lower speed limit is to help protect contractors' construction crews, Kansas Department of Transportation maintenance workers and inspectors. In some places, those workers toil inches away from onrushing vehicles -- with only a traffic cone or temporary barrier between them and a potentially deadly crash.

But the reduced speed limit is there just as much to protect the people traveling through the work zone, said KDOT's Nick Rogers. In fact, most people injured in work zone crashes are motorists.

Rogers, KDOT's Senior Traffic Control Engineer, explained that there are many reasons to heed the lower speed limit in a work zone. The roadway might be temporarily altered -- to channel traffic differently, in a more confined space. The area just off the roadway might be excavated during the construction. Construction equipment might have to exit or enter. Motorists who slow down to the posted speed and pay attention are more likely to avoid a collision.

Another thing a motorist might consider: Aside from the risks of speeding in a work zone, if the aim of driving faster is to get some place sooner, speeding doesn't accomplish much. For example, speeding up to 65 mph from 55 mph saves only one minute in a 6-mile trip.

In 2022, 13 people died in Kansas work zone crashes, and 341 suffered injuries, KDOT figures show. Nationwide, speed was a contributing factor in about one-third of fatal work zone crashes the last several years, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation. In addition, about one-fifth of all the deadly work zone crashes involved rear-end collisions.

Rogers acknowledged that some motorists might think the lower speed limit applies only during the work week or when crews obviously working. It's Kansas law, he noted, the reduced work zone speed limit on highways applies all the time it is posted and fines are double. That is regardless of the time or whether construction is happening at that moment.

Workers come and go in vehicles that need to be able to slow down or stop when entering and exiting the work site, with construction shifting from place to place. Sometimes, work is required to take place at night or on weekends, and sometimes it's not.

"It's a very fluid situation," said Duane Flug, KDOT District Five Construction and Materials Engineer based in Hutchinson. He has spent years inspecting highway construction in Wichita-area work zones.

Flug noted that once the reduced work zone speed limit gets posted, it's not practical – or safe – to move the speed limit signs to only the spot where work is going on at any given moment. Both Flug and Rogers said that setting up signs for a work zone is one of the most potentially dangerous jobs because workers are exposed to traffic while installing the signs. They remain vulnerable until motorists realize the need to slow down.

The signs are strategically placed so that motorists can slow down in time. "We want them to slow down prior to getting to our people, to give us a little buffer zone," Flug said.

He asked that travelers think of the workers they are passing: "These guys out there are a foot away from traffic. There's a cone between you and a semi going 70."

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