Kentucky’s Rural Roads More Deadly Than Most Other States, Report Says

By EVAN HEICHELBECH (KPR) | May 27-28, 2019

Drivers in Kentucky are at a higher risk of losing their lives on rural roads than they are on rural roads across the rest of the country, according to a new report.

A report released on Wednesday by TRIP, a national transportation research group, ranks Kentucky as having the seventh highest fatality rate on rural, non-interstate roads at 2.54 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled. The fatality rate on all other roads in the state is nearly two-and-a-half times lower at 1.02 fatalities per 100 million miles traveled, according to the study.

“[Rural roads] are what farmers rely on to get their goods to market,” she said. “It’s what many truckers rely on for the last portion of the haul … And so it’s important to keep rural roads in good condition to keep people safe and to keep commerce moving.”

The reasons rural roads are so inherently dangerous can be traced back to the structural safety of the roads themselves, or lack thereof. “These rural roads oftentimes lack the safety features that would be more common on other roads,” Bonifas Kelly said. “Those are things like wider shoulders, or even things like left-hand turn lanes or lighting and illumination. Those safety features all go a long way towards making the driving environment more forgiving so that if a driver does make a mistake, they don’t pay for that mistake with their life.”

The national average for fatality rates on rural, non-interstate roads is 2.14 per 100 million miles traveled and .88 on all other roads, the report says. South Carolina had the highest fatality rate in the U.S. at 3.6, and nearby states Tennessee and Indiana have fatality rates at 2.55 and 2.32 per 100 million miles traveled, respectively.

“The safety on these roads is not up to par and that means that people are losing their lives unnecessarily,” said Carolyn Bonifas Kelly, TRIP’s associate director of research and communication. “It really is a national issue on many different fronts.”

The report, called “Rural Connections: Challenges and Opportunities in America’s Heartland,” also found that 27 percent of Kentucky’s rural roads are rated as being in poor or mediocre condition.

Bonifas Kelly said the rural roads in states like Kentucky are critical parts of the transportation system, calling them “the last link in the food chain” for the transportation of many states’ commercial and agricultural products.