

State of Our Roads: Rural NC roads among deadliest in nation

by Lauren Brigman | Thursday, August 1st 2019

HENDERSON COUNTY, N.C. (WLOS) — A [recent report ranks North Carolina third](#) in the nation for the highest rate of deaths on rural roads. Troopers in Western North Carolina say Kanuga Road in Henderson County stands out on the list.

News 13 was there as Wilburn Dotson picked up pieces of his rock wall that buffers his home along Kanuga Road. He says it has been hit at least three times by drivers.

Dotson has lived along Kanuga Road for 60 years and he has seen the pace of traffic pick up.

“Well, the speed is the main thing. It’s a 40 mile per hour speed limit through here, but there’s hardly anybody that does the speed limit,” Dotson says.

Johnson Family Farm sits at the intersection of Kanuga Road, State Street and Erkwood Drive. When asked what makes this road more dangerous than others, Kelli Campbell says she often encounters aggressive drivers while trying to get to and from work.

“I go 40 (miles per hour), and I have three little kids in my car, so I don’t go over the speed limit, and people are always riding me, trying to push me to go faster. So, I personally think it’s a lot of speed and human error. Text messaging,” Campbell says.

[TRIP, a national transportation research group](#) out of Washington, D.C. [released a report in May 2019 ranking North Carolina third](#) in the nation for fatal crashes on rural roads. The group based the ranking on 2017 statistics. North Carolina had 813 fatal crashes that year.

The NC Highway Patrol breaks down the top two to three counties in Western North Carolina for the most fatal accidents on rural roads, over the past three years. Henderson and Buncombe counties made the list each year.

In 2017, local troopers saw an uptick on one specific roadway. The Highway Patrol reports seven fatal wrecks on rural roads in Henderson County in 2017, four of which happened on Kanuga Road.

“It does not surprise me because people are not doing what they’re supposed to be doing on these back roads,” Campbell says of the findings.

*SOURCE: NORTH CAROLINA HIGHWAY PATROL

STATE OF OUR ROADS			
FATAL CRASHES ON RURAL ROADS			
	2016	2017	2018
BUNCOMBE	3	8	9
HENDERSON	4	7	4
HAYWOOD	3	-	-
RUTHERFORD	-	6	-

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Top WNC counties for the most fatal accidents on rural roads, over the past three years. (Source: NC Highway Patrol).

The Highway Patrol agrees, saying inattention, impaired and reckless driving contributed to those four fatal crashes.

“One of them was where an individual went left of center and hit the other vehicle head on, causing a death. The other three were simply where the driver or operator of the vehicle made some type of mistake,” N.C. Highway Patrol Master Trooper Rico Stephens says.

Since then, troopers say they’ve stepped up their presence on the road.

“We gave it a strong focus and emphasis, and the following year Kanuga Road never made the list. And that could be from having a check point, line patrol or stationary patrol,” Stephens says.

What can be done to make Kanuga Road safer? Residents say widening the roadway and even more law enforcement presence are a couple options.

“They’re talking about widening it and looks like they’re going to have to, to take care of the traffic,” Dotson says.

“Just the presence of having police and the highway patrol out here would be great,” adds Campbell.

Troopers say the actions of drivers can help make a difference, too.

“Avoid the distractions, avoid the alcohol or the impaired driving, and then slow down,” Stephens says.

A NCDOT widening project for Kanuga Road is in the works. The final documents are expected to be completed this fall, with right of way acquisition planned for fall 2020 and construction beginning two years later.