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PRESS RELEASE

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Drug Use Rises in California Fatal Crashes

Increasing Rates Prompt New Law Enforcement Training, Drug Testing Equipment and Prosecution Programs

Sacramento, CA – The problem of drugged driving continues to rise, according to figures released today by the California Office of Traffic Safety (OTS). Based on data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 30 percent of all drivers who were killed in motor vehicle crashes in California in 2010 tested positive for legal and/or illegal drugs, a percentage that has been increasing since 2006.

Drugged driving is a problem not widely recognized by the public, but increases in crashes, fatalities and injuries point out that we all must acknowledge this serious problem and work to curb it. The problem of drugged driving is growing, even while DUI fatalities have been in decline. Drugs which can impair driving are not only illegal narcotics and stimulants, but can be prescription and over-the-counter drugs as well as marijuana and its synthetic substitutes. Many, when combined with alcohol, heighten the effect of both.

“You can be as deadly behind the wheel with marijuana or prescription drugs as you can with over-the-limit alcohol,” said Christopher J. Murphy, Director of the Office of Traffic Safety. “The bottom line is drugs and driving do not mix.”

Drug-impaired driving is often under-reported and under-recognized and toxicology testing is expensive. Additionally, because there is no established impairment level for drugs, prosecuting drug impaired driving cases can be difficult.

With the increased awareness of this growing problem, the Office of Traffic Safety and the California Highway Patrol are working together to provide Officers statewide with specialized training to detect and apprehend drug-impaired drivers. The federally funded program, new to California and developed

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by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, is called Advanced Roadside Impaired Driving Enforcement (ARIDE). In the past five months alone, more than 700 officers from police departments across the state have attended ARIDE training.

Police Departments are also being encouraged to send Officers to the most advanced drug recognition program to become Drug Recognition Experts (DRE). CHP manages the statewide program that currently has over 1000 officers as active DRE's – the most in the nation. Drug detection experts will be in place more often at DUI checkpoints and federally funded grant support will be used to fund operations to detect and apprehend drug-impaired drivers.

“This invaluable ARIDE and DRE training for law enforcement is the key to successfully removing drug-impaired drivers from the road, ultimately reducing the number of people killed and injured by irresponsible behavior and making our communities a safer place,” said CHP Commissioner Joe Farrow. “It’s also imperative that the public realize the synergistic effect of combining alcohol with prescription or over-the-counter drugs, and the danger this presents while driving.”

OTS announced last month that Sacramento and Orange Counties were awarded federal funding to purchase state-of-the-art drug testing equipment. District Attorney Offices in eight counties are being funded to create special “vertical prosecution” teams that will follow drug-impaired driving cases from arrest through trial. Regional Traffic Safety Resource Prosecutors are providing training to District Attorney Offices on how to successfully prosecute drug impaired driving cases.

“Drug impaired driving is the new challenge for not only law enforcement and the judicial system, but for DUI prevention efforts as well,” said Ventura County District Attorney Greg Totten, president of the California District Attorneys Association. “We need to make sure that drivers displaying objective signs of drug impairment either through bad driving or failed standardized field sobriety testing are arrested and prosecuted.”

Research shows drugs have an adverse effect on judgment, reaction time, motor skills and memory – critical skills for safe and responsible driving. Recently, experts at the Dalhousie University in Canada released the results of a study that found that drivers who had used marijuana within three hours of driving had nearly double the risk of causing a crash as those not under the influence of alcohol or drugs. The Canadian research reviewed nine studies of more than 49,000 people involved in crashes.

In fall 2010, six cities in California conducted nighttime weekend “voluntary” roadside surveys and found that the percentage of drivers who tested positive for marijuana (8.4%) was greater than the percentage that were using alcohol (7.6%).

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