



DATE: May 15, 2015

TO: House Committee on Transportation and Economic Development

FROM: Troy Costales, Administrator Transportation Safety Division
Amy Joyce, Legislative Liaison

SUBJECT: SB 694A, motorcycle lane splitting

INTRODUCTION

Senate Bill 694A would allow motorcycles and mopeds to pass vehicles in the same lane or travel between lanes of traffic during traffic slow-downs. This practice is commonly known as lane splitting (also lane sharing or lane filtering). The department has grave safety concerns about this bill.

DISCUSSION

Lane splitting can be dangerous for motorists for several reasons. For the motorcyclist, the gap between vehicles would be very narrow. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) a motorcycle takes up three-fourths of the space of a car in traffic. Simply put, operating between lanes is dangerous. Also, the motorcyclist risks unexpected behaviors from those in passenger vehicles around them. Whether initiating a slow lane change or opening the vehicle door in stopped traffic, drivers and passengers who are in very close proximity may inadvertently injure the motorcyclist.¹

Advocates for lane splitting have argued that one reason in favor of the idea is concern for motorcyclists being rear-ended in stopped or slowed traffic. An eight-year survey of Oregon crash data (2005-2013) looked at instances when a motorcyclist was stopped on a main freeway (a rough approximation of the highways covered by the A-engrossed bill). In total over the eight years, there were 14 crashes on main highways (not including ramps or connections) resulting in 21 injuries and no fatalities.

Considering Oregon has approximately 1,100 motorcyclist crashes annually (or about 8,800 total in those eight years), the data suggests the benefit does not justify the safety exposure. Comparatively, in 2014 motorcyclists accounted for 13% of all Oregon fatal crashes – 45 lives lost² – although representing only 9% of driving privileges and 3.5% of the vehicle registrations. Oregon crash data reveals that 75-80% of Oregon motorcycle fatalities each year are caused by the motorcyclists themselves – not other drivers. This data suggests we should not be putting motorcyclists in even riskier situations.

¹ California DMV. *California Motorcycle Handbook*. California Department of Motor Vehicles, 2015.

² Oregon's 2014 crash data is preliminary, and expected to be finalized in a few months.

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The road environment itself causes additional concern regarding lane splitting. ODOT uses recessed reflectors and raised vinyl striping for increased visibility and durability. Pavement seams between lanes and cracks in pavement are sealed with a rubber-like compound (sometimes called “tar snakes”). Motorcyclists have complained to ODOT about each of these, expressing concern about potential loss of control when going over these items when changing lanes. And when sand and other debris is on the road it tends to collect between lanes where there is the least contact with vehicles’ tires. Yet this bill would put motorcyclists right on top of these road features.

Finally, no state authorizes lane splitting. While lane sharing is practiced in California, it is neither expressly allowed nor prohibited in statute. The University of California at Berkeley has been conducting a study of motorcycle crashes and lane splitting. They have released a preliminary report, but the full study has not been completed pending the collection and analysis of additional data.³ The study so far is analyzing approximately 8000 motorcycle crashes in a single year.

SUMMARY

ODOT has grave safety concerns about Senate Bill 694A due to the close proximity of the motorcyclist to the adjacent motor vehicles and risk of crash. Oregon’s data demonstrates that our state does not have a safety problem with motorcyclists being rear-ended in traffic. The bill would exchange that reality for the inherently dangerous practice of lane splitting. No other state has codified lane splitting.

³ <http://www.ots.ca.gov/pdf/Publications/LaneSplittingReport.pdf>