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## **“I Can Drive 55”, New Night Speed Limit on Hwy. 83**

By Caroline Jenkins

Even students at Seeley-Swan High School know the dangers of driving Highway 83: deer. You see around town a bumper sticker designed by SSSH graduate Laura Love, when she was a student, that asks you to “Pray for the deer, I drive Hwy. 83.”

Well now the Montana Transportation Commission has acknowledged this hazard. Last Wednesday a new interim, night-time speed limit went into effect from Clearwater Junction all the way up Hwy. 83 to Echo Lake (north of Swan Lake) – reduced speed sections are still in effect.

“I think most longtime Swan Valley residents were already driving slower at night. People don’t want to be hitting deer. They’re tired of seeing carcasses on the side of the road,” noted Anne Dahl, President of Swan Ecosystem Center in Condon. “It’s about time the speed limit reflects the problem,” she said of the interim speed change.

Jim Lynch, Montana Department of Transportation Director, presented topline study findings and the request to implement an interim speed limit to the Commission, and on February 12 the new speed was approved according to sources.

The speed limit is not cast in black-top, rather, MDOT will continue to evaluate the

effect of the speed reduction and the on-going need for this change. They may make it permanent at some point, according to sources.

“Although FWP wasn’t directly involved in this decision we recognize that there is a strong link between highway speeds and the nighttime animal-vehicle collision rate,” commented Jay Kolbe, Wildlife Biologist for Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. “Elk, deer, and many other species are most active during low-light periods and at speeds over 55 mph, drivers often over-drive their headlights on winding roads like Hwy. 83. Cutting speeds from 70 mph to 55 mph reduces vehicle stopping distance by nearly 50%. In addition, slower speeds increase reaction times and drivers are more able to avoid hitting animals crossing the roads.”

MDOT cited that between 2005-2007 there were 231 vehicle-animal crashes reported along Hwy. 83, seven of these resulted in fatalities. This crash rate is 2.8 times the statewide average and accounts for 26.1% of all road accidents on Hwy. 83 – the state average for animal-vehicle collisions is 17.2%.

Additionally, “Department maintenance forces reported collecting 1,445 carcasses on or along the roadway,” according to an MDOT summary document. Not surprisingly most of these were whitetail deer carcasses (94.5%), however, collisions with larger animals, including elk, moose and grizzly bears have been reported.

“Deer, elk, and bear road kill rates along the Seeley-Swan stretch of Hwy. 83 have increased along with traffic volumes in recent years and now are some of the highest in Montana. This new nighttime speed limit will almost certainly reduce unnecessary

wildlife mortality and should make nighttime driving safer,” said Kolbe.

According to a study conducted by Western Transportation Institute at Montana State University for MDOT, the highest number of animal-vehicle collisions occurs on Fridays, followed by Sundays and Thursdays. It won't come as any surprise to local residents that the rate of reported incidents steadily increases each hour from 5 pm through 11 pm. And 8am – a time for increased traffic traveling to school or work – has the highest number of reported collisions, based on law enforcement data collected between 1999-2003. There are also more reported animal-vehicle collisions during the summer months when vehicle traffic is heavier along the corridor.

“After observing both wildlife and traffic for over 30 years on and adjacent to Highway 83, it is apparent to me that many motorists traveling through the Seeley-Swan have no idea of the sheer numbers of animals on or crossing the road at any given moment. Reducing the speed limit has great potential benefit for the safety of both people and wildlife,” said Tom Parker of Northwest Connections, a group that has been very involved in monitoring studies in the Swan Valley.

According to MDOT, the study is not the end of their work. Working with local residents and organizations with more intimate knowledge of the area and its wildlife patterns, MDOT will look to identify “more comprehensive mitigation strategies to reduce animal-vehicle collisions along the corridor.”