

## How to stay safe during roadway construction season

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With warmer weather in the forecast for the foreseeable future, construction work is in full swing. Up and down the I-5 corridor and across the state, drivers are seeing a large number of work zones they pass through on their daily work commutes, while driving their children to and from summer camps, and during their final summer road trips before Labor Day Weekend.

We are all used to seeing the flashing amber lights and the orange construction cones, but what can we do to ensure everyone stays safe at the height of roadway construction season?

Roadway construction is one of the most dangerous occupations in the United States. The risk of death on a highway construction job is seven times higher than that of an average worker. As some in the industry have put it, working on the side of a busy highway is “like looking down the barrel of a loaded gun all day long.”

Currently, there are hundreds of active work zones in Oregon—giving inattentive drivers substantial opportunity to cause a serious problem. National studies show that driver inattention is the leading cause of work zone related crashes, while speeding is a close second.

Time and again, we are reminded that many people do not understand the severity of the situation until after an accident has occurred. Traffic is stopped and people are frustrated until they come upon the scene of the crash and realize their commute home is through another person’s place of business.

Work zone crashes are serious for both drivers and workers. Both nationally and in Oregon, more drivers or their passengers are killed or injured in work zone crashes than workers. In fact, 80 percent of work zone fatalities are drivers or their passengers. Over the past 10 years in Oregon, there is an average of 510 work zone crashes per year—including an average of 18 serious injury and 9 fatal crashes per year.

From a construction perspective, work zone accidents also have a pronounced impact on project schedules and costs. Twenty-five percent of contractors reported that work zone crashes during the past year have forced them to temporarily shut down construction activity. Those delays were often lengthy, as 38 percent of those project shut downs lasted two or more days (an indirect safety cost).

To draw attention to *avoidable* work zone tragedies, the Oregon-Columbia Chapter of the Associated General Contractors, the Oregon Department of Transportation, the Oregon Trucking Associations, AAA Oregon/Idaho, the Oregon State Police, and several area law enforcement agencies have worked together over the past couple of years on the “Orange is your clue” campaign to spread the word about work zone safety.

Throughout the campaign, stakeholders and agencies have stressed that a successful approach to work zone safety must be three-pronged:

- **Engineering** a positive separation between the public and workers on job sites;
- **Enforcement** of appropriate work zone speeds with the presence of police vehicles in and around job sites; and
- **Education** of the public on identifying work zone signs and obeying speed zones

But what can a normal driver on the road do to ensure construction zone safety?

A construction work zone is considered “operational” 24 hours a day, whether or not workers are present. It is critical for drivers to remember that they are driving through a place of business. Because of this, it is imperative that the public slow down and expect delays while approaching work zones as many of these can have narrow traffic lanes, closed shoulders, and workers close to live traffic.

With free, active maps on every smartphone, there is no reason drivers should not be aware of conditions facing them. If the maps show delays, plan an alternate route.

Also, the color orange is your clue! When orange signs, barrels, cones, and barricades are in place, drivers should SLOW DOWN and watch for highway workers. If orange is not an acceptable color, they will likely see red and blue lights shortly after.

It is hard to change the habit prioritizing work zone safety standards when a driver believes speeding to the next business appointment or their child’s swim lessons if they are running late is more important. Additionally, drivers tend to believe driving is a right and not a privilege. That thinking is dangerous and potentially deadly.

Especially as our industry’s busy season is at its peak, there are new opportunities to refocus on the importance of safety in work zones and the incredibly critical role the public has in maintaining a safe work environment for our employees. There is nothing more important than for drivers to arrive alive, and for our workers to go home to their families every night.

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