



## **STATE HIGHWAY 154 FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

*Updated: September 28, 2021*

### **1. Is it true that this is one of the most dangerous highways in the United States?**

No, this is not true. The collision rates for Highway 154 are actually less than the statewide averages for similar two-lane routes in California.

### **2. How many people drive this highway and where are they from?**

The average number of vehicles using Highway 154 in 2019 (pre-Covid) ranges from 12,500 in the Los Olivos area to 13,900 vehicles a day at San Marcos Pass/Camino Cielo. In comparison, the 2019 volumes for US 101 range from 24,300 north of Buellton to 30,900 north of Goleta.

Although there is no data available showing where the motorists are from who use Highway 154 in the CHP Santa Barbara Area, 49% of the collisions (180) that occurred from January 2019 to September 2021 were caused by Santa Barbara County residents. 60% of the people arrested (38) for Driving Under the Influence from January 2019 to September 2021 by the CHP Santa Barbara Area on Highway 154 south of Paradise were from Santa Barbara County.

### **3. Are there certain locations that have a higher concentration of collisions?**

Caltrans has an ongoing monitoring system that identifies collision concentrations where collision history indicates a pattern susceptible to correction by a safety improvement project. Projects may be implemented at spot locations or may be a larger scale system-wide improvement.

If the monitoring program identifies sections of Highway 154 or intersections that are experiencing an above average collision frequency, those locations are investigated. If a correctable pattern is identified, then countermeasures are put into place to reduce the number and severity of the collisions. Those countermeasures include projects and maintenance activities, many of which have already been constructed or are planned for construction.

#### **4. Is it possible to prevent trucks from using the highway?**

Because trucking is a vital component of the economy, State and Federal law forbids highway restrictions to truck access except for "safety and engineering" reasons.

There are existing truck restrictions on certain portions of Highway 154. Trucks hauling hazardous waste are not allowed on Highway 154 between Highway 246 and Santa Barbara except for pickup and delivery. There is also a yellow advisory for trucks longer than a 30' kingpin to rear-axle length from Santa Aqueda Creek (PM 10.0) near Armour Ranch Road to Highway 192 (PM 31.6). There are signs in place reflecting these restrictions and maps are available on the Caltrans website that truckers can use for their route planning. To encourage through trucks to stay on US 101 instead of taking Highway 154, there are signs at the northerly and southerly interchanges with US 101 recommending trucks stay on US 101.

Sections 34501 and 35650 through 35655 of the California Vehicle Code provide a means for Caltrans to restrict vehicles above a certain weight or length from using a state highway if an engineering investigation and public hearing demonstrate that the road cannot safely accommodate the operation of those vehicles. Restricting trucks to less than 16,000 pounds (8 tons) or less than 38' kingpin to rear axle length on a state highway would require a law passed by the state legislature.

Highway 154 does not have a high rate of collisions involving trucks, so additional truck restrictions from what already exists are not recommended. Passing lanes and turnouts have been provided at multiple locations along Highway 154 to enable faster-moving vehicles to safely pass slower-moving vehicles.

#### **5. Can we lower the speed limit?**

The setting of speed limits is not an arbitrary process. It requires a rational defensible determination to maintain public confidence and compliance. Speed laws are enacted by the State Legislature and compiled in the California Vehicle Code (CVC). These statutory requirements allow Caltrans to set speed limits that are uniform, rational, and enforceable with full support of the judicial system. For Highway 154, California Vehicle Code Section 22349 establishes a statutory maximum speed limit of 55 mph. California Vehicle Code Section 22354 grants Caltrans the authority to reduce speed limits below the statutory maximum speed limit. However, reduced speed limits may only be established based on an Engineering

and Traffic Survey (E&TS) that has been performed in accordance with standard traffic engineering practices.

Attempts to lower the speed limit on Highway 154 have not been supported by an E&TS. Without an E&TS that justifies a lower speed limit, the CHP cannot enforce the speed limit using electronic measuring devices such as Lidar or radar.

On 9/9/2021, the California State Legislature approved Assembly Bill 43 that will be sent to the Governor for signature. The Governor has until October 10, 2021 to sign this legislation. The bill allows more flexibility in establishing or retaining lower speed limits that can still be enforced by electronic measuring devices. It does not appear that any of these new provisions will have an impact on State Route 154 because Caltrans is not given the same authority to lower speed limits on state highways as local agencies are for roads under local jurisdiction, unless it is in a residential or business district.

**6. Can we install a concrete barrier, painted median, or other divider down the center of the highway?**

Due to the narrow width on many parts of Highway 154, a median barrier or other divider such as flexible plastic delineators cannot be installed because there would be insufficient room for drivers to pass a bicyclist or disabled vehicle. Furthermore, this area is prone to wildland fires and fire equipment would not have the ability to pass stopped traffic in an emergency incident. Barriers could also interfere with the ability to efficiently evacuate people in the event of an emergency.

Additionally, adding a median barrier would raise the speed limit on the highway to 65 mph because it could then be classified as a divided highway per the California Vehicle Code, and many portions of Highway 154 are not designed for a 65 mph speed limit.

Widening the road to provide a painted median would have substantial environmental impacts and be cost prohibitive in many locations due to the terrain. However, opportunities for widening are considered when a pavement rehabilitation project is proposed.

**7. Can we install stop signs at the intersections to slow people down?**

Caltrans follows the warrants listed in Section 2B.07 of the California Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices 2014 Edition (Rev. 6) when evaluating the need for an all-way stop. Using a stop sign to control speeds is not one of the warrants.

At locations where an unwarranted stop sign is placed, drivers will often ignore the stop and roll through the intersection, or worse, not even notice the stop sign and drive through it at full speed or use their brakes at the last minute. This is not expected by the other drivers and pedestrians at an intersection and can cause collisions. Also, rear-end collisions often increase when stop signs are installed. Therefore, unwarranted stop signs are not recommended because of the likelihood that it will result in an increase in collisions at the intersection.

## **8. Can we use photo enforcement?**

Automated Speed Enforcement (ASE) is not currently allowed in California. Public safety and public trust are increased by having a uniformed officer patrolling the highway instead of ASE for the following reasons:

- a. *Unsafe speed behaviors not addressed by ASE.* Although unsafe speed is one of the leading causes of traffic collisions, it does not necessarily mean the vehicle at fault was traveling above the speed limit. Unsafe speed is often determined to be the primary collision factor when vehicles are traveling well below the posted limit and the driver is unable to stop his/her vehicle in time for pedestrians or slow or stopped traffic. ASE systems will neither detect nor deter this type of unsafe speeding.
- b. *Reduction in officer contacts would lead to less discovery of other public safety violations.* When officers make personal contact with a violator during an enforcement stop, the officer can discover other potential violations such as driver's license suspensions, unsafe vehicle equipment violations, driving under the influence violations, and other more serious crimes as well. To the extent ASE results in fewer enforcement stops, there would possibly be a reduction in enforcement of these additional public safety related violations.
- c. *Multiple citations can be issued before the user has knowledge of a violation.* Previous legislation proposed ASE citations be issued to the registered owner of a vehicle instead of the driver. A vehicle could be targeted for a citation multiple times before the registered owner receives a notice and realizes the violations have occurred, and it's possible that it's not even the registered owner who was driving the car at the time of violation.
- d. *Lack of immediate education and behavior modification.* The traffic safety benefit of an ASE program is diminished because it does not include immediate traffic safety education to a driver to modify

behavior. If an officer stops a driver for speeding, the officer can immediately stop the unsafe behavior and educate the driver about the dangers of unsafe speeding in the context of the specific situation. ASE systems have no immediate education component, and any behavior modification that occurs will be delayed, general, and impersonal.

- e. *Lack of consequences for continued unsafe driving.* ASE systems that target the vehicle and not the driver remove a crucial component of the state's traffic safety framework: driver license record points. A driver who commits multiple moving violations or who has otherwise demonstrated he/she cannot operate a vehicle safely will accumulate points and eventually receive a license suspension due to negligence. This process helps the DMV and law enforcement determine when someone is an unsafe driver, and impound authority provides a valuable tool for officers to remove unsafe drivers from the road. The process is designed to ensure habitually unsafe drivers lose their driving privilege and can no longer endanger other drivers. A driver cited by ASE, however, could be cited countless times without any effect on driving privilege so long as the driver has the ability to pay. This limits the traffic safety benefits of the ASE program. The problem is exacerbated when the negligent driver is not the registered owner and has no direct consequence for their negligent behavior.

#### **9. Can we use the electronic message signs on US 101 to tell people not to use Highway 154?**

Caltrans' policy is that changeable message signs (CMS) are only used for traffic incidents, unexpected conditions, special events, travel times, AMBER alerts, road closures, and approved safety messages. Using a CMS to encourage drivers to take a different route when there is no traffic incident or other condition that warrants the use of the sign does not meet that criteria. It would also reduce the effectiveness of the sign when a condition existed on Highway 154 that actually warranted the redirection of traffic.

#### **10. Can we install "high crash area" or similar signs at certain locations?**

Signs have been installed at several locations on Highway 154 stating "Safety Corridor, Don't Drink & Drive". High collision locations are identified through Caltrans' collision monitoring program and if a correctable pattern is identified, countermeasures are implemented to reduce the number of collisions at that location. "High crash area" signage is not an acceptable countermeasure because it does not address the problem. Also signs on state highways must comply with the California Manual on Uniform Traffic

Control Devices (CA MUTCD), and this type of sign is not an approved sign in the CA MUTCD.

There is a program available for families of victims of drunk driving to request memorial signage on the state highways. Information on this program can be found at the following website: <https://dot.ca.gov/programs/safety-programs/victims-memorial-signs>

## **11. Can we make Highway 154 a toll road?**

Public-private partnerships to create toll roads have been used in California to address severe congestion or to help fund construction and maintenance of costly infrastructure such as bridges. Toll roads are not created to discourage traffic from using a route altogether, instead the tolls are structured to encourage drivers to carpool or use a route during non-peak hours. Toll facilities are typically newly constructed parallel routes and do not decrease the number of non-toll lanes on an existing highway. That said, however, California law currently does not allow the creation of new toll-road partnership opportunities. Further, US 101 could not be considered an acceptable alternative route because there are many residents and businesses along Highway 154 who are not served directly by US 101 and must use Highway 154 for access. In addition, there would not be toll exemptions to locals or those doing business in the area. If Highway 154 became a toll road without constructing an acceptable parallel route, all federal funds that have been used to construct and improve Highway 154 throughout the years would have to be returned to the federal government, which would defeat the purpose of trying to use tolls to raise funds to maintain the highway. Generally speaking, very large traffic volumes are needed to make a toll road self-sufficient. Highway 154 does not have that kind of volume.

## **12. Can we install vehicle speed-feedback signs?**

Caltrans may install permanent electronic Vehicle Speed Feedback signs if there is a significant correctable collision pattern at a specific location and other countermeasures such as curve warning signs have not resolved the problem. Additionally, Caltrans may permit local jurisdictions to install and maintain Vehicle Speed Feedback signs on state highways under a Caltrans encroachment permit at approved locations.

The public can request that the CHP place a temporary radar trailer at a specific location, but there are a limited number of trailers available and adequate shoulder width would be needed so as not to interfere with vehicles or bicyclists.

### **13. Can we straighten out curves and widen the shoulders?**

Due to the terrain, straightening out all the curves and widening all the shoulders would have substantial environmental impacts and be cost prohibitive. Widening shoulders is considered with every pavement rehabilitation project and implemented to the extent feasible. Caltrans' collision monitoring program identifies locations with high run-off-the-road rates, which could trigger a project to straighten out a curve if other more cost-effective countermeasures are unsuccessful.

### **14. Can we get Google Maps to tell people to take US 101 instead of Highway 154?**

Asking Google and other mapping programs to change their mapping is a common request from the public and agencies throughout the United States. The City of Buellton and the County of Santa Barbara have both attempted to contact Google regarding redirecting traffic with no success. These are public roads and Google is a private company. Absent a legislative act to regulate Google and other mapping programs, the government and the public have no control over the dissemination of this information.

### **15. Can we restrict bicyclists from using the highway?**

One of Caltrans' goals is to "Enhance and connect the multimodal transportation network" and another is "Lead climate action." Restricting bicyclists would be contrary to these goals, and there are no correctable collision patterns involving bicyclists that would support such a restriction.

### **16. Can we increase the fines for traffic violations?**

Highway 154 does not meet the requirements of the California Streets and Highways Code Section 97 for a Safety Enhancement Double Fine Zone. To meet the criteria, the rate of total collisions needs to be at least 1.5 times the statewide average for similar roadways during the most recent three-year period. In addition, the rate of head-on collisions must be at least 1.5 times the statewide average for similar roadways during the most recent three-year period for which data is available. Neither of these criteria are met for Highway 154.

It would require a legislative act to modify the Streets and Highways Code for Highway 154 to be designated as a double fine zone.

## **17. Can we install more rumble strips?**

Centerline rumble strips have been installed along the entire length of Highway 154 and shoulder rumble strips have been installed from the northerly interchange of US101/SR154 through Los Olivos to the Cachuma Village intersection west of Cachuma Lake. Shoulder rumble strips are not installed in locations with narrow shoulders due to the impact it would have on bicyclists.

## **18. What is Caltrans doing to make this highway safer?**

A significant amount of time and money has been invested to make Highway 154 safer. In the past 10 years, Caltrans has initiated about 100 traffic investigations for Highway 154. Although these investigations can be triggered by Caltrans' highway safety monitoring program or operational issues, most of the investigations were initiated because of concerns raised by the public. There have been more investigations done on Highway 154 than any other state highway in Santa Barbara County except for US 101 and Highway 135. Thirty-five of the 100 investigations on Highway 154 resulted in some improvement to the highway. These improvements range from minor improvements that can be addressed by our maintenance department, such as changes to signing and striping, installation of delineators, or trimming vegetation; to major improvements that require initiation of a project.

Some recent projects that have been completed or will be completed on Highway 154 to address safety concerns include:

- a. RUMBLE STRIPS: Four rumble strip projects were completed between 2011 and 2019. Centerline rumble strips have been installed on the entire stretch of Highway 154 and shoulder rumble strips have been installed from the northerly interchange of US101/SR154 through Los Olivos to the Cachuma Village intersection west of Cachuma Lake.
- b. STRIPING: Three striping improvement projects were completed between 2018 and 2019 to upgrade the 4" wide stripes to 6" wide to make them more visible. Any remaining areas where the stripes are still 4" will be upgraded with the next pavement overlay. Left-turn lanes will be installed at the Calkins/Railway intersection under encroachment permit in conjunction with the adjacent development. Numerous other small striping improvements have also been completed as a result of traffic investigations.

- c. SIGNAGE: All the curve warning signs on Highway 154 were upgraded in 2020. Signage on US 101 in Santa Barbara recommending northbound trucks use US 101 instead of Highway 154 was installed in 2020. There was already similar signage on US 101 for southbound trucks approaching the northerly interchange with Highway 154. Experimental signage was installed at the Roblar intersection in August 2020 to encourage drivers to look both ways before pulling out onto Highway 154. There have also been numerous signs installed along Highway 154 as a result of traffic investigations ranging from curve warning signs, flashing beacons, intersection warning signs, speed limit signs, signs restricting trucks in certain areas, and many others.
- d. TRAFFIC CALMING: A roundabout was installed at the Highway 154/Highway 246 intersection in 2014 and another one will be installed at the Highway 154/Edison/Baseline intersection in 2023.
- e. FLASHING BEACON: Overhead flashing beacons were installed at the Highway 154/Edison/Baseline intersection in November 2019 to improve visibility of the stop signs.
- f. BARRIERS: New guardrail was installed at two locations between Postmile (PM) 23.8 and PM 27.4 in 2019. Guardrail was reconstructed at two other locations between PM 25.4 and PM 29.3 in 2013. Barrier fencing was installed on Cold Springs Bridge in 2012 to discourage people from jumping off the bridge.
- g. PAVEMENT TREATMENT: A High Friction Surface Treatment (HFST) will be placed at 5 locations in 2022 that are experiencing a high concentration of collisions during wet roadway conditions. It is estimated that this improvement will result in a reduction of 127 collisions over a 10-year period.
- h. PASSING LANES AND TURNOUTS: Passing lanes and turnouts have been constructed to discourage illegal passing.
- i. PEDESTRIAN IMPROVEMENTS: The Alamo Pintado Creek pedestrian bridge in Los Olivos will be replaced in 2023.
- j. LANDSCAPE MAINTENANCE: Caltrans' maintenance crews are regularly trimming vegetation so it doesn't encroach on the shoulders and to maintain sight distance at the intersections.

Caltrans will continue to monitor the safety of the highway, address hot spot locations as they arise, and respond to public concerns.

**19. What is the California Highway Patrol (CHP) doing to make this highway safer?**

The CHP provides enforcement and education to the motoring public. They work with other state and local partners to provide solutions to the communities' concerns about Highway 154.

CHP provides information to the public about traffic safety through social media, radio interviews, in person community events and presentations, through CHP traffic safety programs, such as Start Smart, Age Well Drive Smart, and Every 15 Minute Program. CHP utilizes "in-View" patrol and enforcement tools/techniques to stop and contact motorists when traffic violations are observed or called in by the public. CHP utilizes an internal program to track all traffic complaints when complaints are called into the local CHP office. CHP also utilizes collision data to focus resources and grant programs to target high collision areas and or specific traffic safety concerns local communities may have.

In the 2018/2019 and 2020/21 grant cycles, the CHP received funding to provide additional enforcement on Highway 154 and education to the public regarding traffic safety and the dangers of driving while under the influence. The latest grant ended on 9/30/21 and it is anticipated that the CHP will continue to apply for grant funding in future cycles.

**20. What is the Santa Barbara County Association of Governments (SBCAG) doing to make this highway safer?**

SBCAG is the regional transportation agency for Santa Barbara county working with the state, federal and local government partners to plan, fund, and deliver transportation infrastructure projects. The agency has a long-established interest in regional collaboration to address traffic safety along Highway 154. This is exemplified in efforts to engage in regional initiatives to help to reduce fatalities and injuries, promote efforts to educate the public on traffic safety, and support funding of public safety agencies to enforce traffic laws.

In November 2019 the SBCAG Board of Directors formed the Highway 154 Safety Committee, a standing committee to support on-going efforts of SBCAG as a regional entity in assisting public agencies with addressing safety on Highway 154.

SBCAG, in partnership with the Santa Ynez Band of Chumash Indians, completed a traffic circulation and safety study in the Santa Ynez Valley. The purpose of the Santa Ynez Valley Traffic Circulation and Safety Study is to comprehensively assess and identify needed circulation and

safety improvements for the multi-modal transportation needs of the Santa Ynez Valley. The Santa Ynez Valley is primarily served by a series of state highways: SR 154, SR 246 and US 101. These state highways handle an increased demand of regional, tourist, and local trips, and also serve as “main street” for several of the cities and communities in the Santa Ynez Valley. As such, there are competing demands on the highway network from passenger vehicles, transit, trucks, cyclists, and pedestrians.

Other efforts include SBCAG's ad-hoc Highway 154 Truck Safety Committee that led to the support of state legislation to place an advisory restriction on large trucks on a portion of Highway 154. Signs were installed by Caltrans in October 2012 advising that trucks longer than a 30' kingpin to rear axle length should not use Highway 154 from Armour Ranch Road to Highway 192. SBCAG's first transportation sales tax program included \$30 million in safety and operational projects that were invested in Highway 154.

## **21. When will the recommendations in the Santa Ynez Valley Traffic Circulation & Safety Study be implemented?**

SBCAG will use public input on safety/multimodal improvement projects to promote implementation with respective agencies. Prioritization of improvement options will be evaluated by community interest, funding availability, and any operational or safety studies needed for the respective intersection modifications such as all-way stops, signals, or roundabouts. The studies would ensure that the proposed intersection improvement meets the requirements listed in the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices and that the appropriate intersection improvement is selected.

## **22. What can I do as a road user to make this highway safer?**

Be responsible for your behaviors behind the wheel of your vehicle. Remember your choices while driving a vehicle can have life altering consequences for yourself and others. Realize that everyone has precious cargo in their vehicles, who also want to arrive at their destinations safely. Every decision made behind the wheel is crucial to your safety and the safety of other community members. Please share the road.

Don't drink and drive. Don't drive under the influence of any substance that impairs your ability to drive. Select a designated driver BEFORE the party begins.

Avoid distractions while driving. Keep your eyes on the road and both hands on the wheel. Don't use your cell phone while driving.

Obey the speed limit and pay attention to the warning signs and advisory speeds (yellow signs with black lettering), particularly when approaching a curve. Slow down even more in wet weather.

Turn on your headlights. This helps other drivers see you and may help avoid a head-on collision.

Encourage your family, friends, and neighbors to also drive safely.