

Safety Programs

May 2026

Project Title: Developing A Safe Systems Approach to Setting Speed Limits-Phase II

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Developing A Safe Systems Approach to Setting Speed Limits-Phase II

Developing a Safe System Approach.

WHAT IS THE NEED?

Transportation professionals and policy makers in California are confronting a growing problem, increases in road traffic fatalities and serious injuries despite a commitment to safety. In California, an average of 4,000 people die each year in traffic crashes and more than 16,000 people are severely injured. Collectively, these traffic crashes cost California over \$53.5 billion, and speeding-related fatalities continue to represent a large portion of California's total traffic fatalities. Research has demonstrated that speed increases crash risk in two ways: it increases the likelihood of being involved in a crash and it increases the severity of injuries sustained by all road users in a crash.

In California, the relationship between speed and crash involvement has prompted calls from local governments to change the way that speed limits are set. In response, the Legislature passed Assembly Bill 2363, which directed the California State Transportation Agency (CalSTA) to convene a Zero Traffic Fatalities Task Force (ZTFTF) comprised of experts from across the state to brainstorm, evaluate, and recommend alternatives to the current speed-limit-setting methodology.

This research project represents the second step towards developing a Safe System Approach to setting speed limits, per CalSTA's recommendation. In the first phase, New Zealand's speed-limit-setting approach was identified and recommended as a framework that aligns with CalSTA's recommendation and the Safe System Approach. Changing how California establishes speed limits will be a significant undertaking that will require funding, time, and expertise to facilitate strategic decision and policy making.



DRISI provides solutions and knowledge that improves California's transportation system.

WHAT ARE WE DOING?

The following activities will be conducted to successfully complete the research:

- Develop a context-sensitive street category framework for identifying street with similar safety requirements for setting speed limits.
- Determine safe and appropriate speed limits for each street category based on existing guidelines and safety literature.
- Recommend a risk assessment method to determine when speed limits should vary from the baseline for a street category.
- Identify the additional stages for rollout of new speed limit setting practice.

WHAT IS OUR GOAL?

The objective of this research is to begin developing the technical requirements for a Safe System Approach to setting speed limits in California. The desired outcome is to identify the next stages for adopting the new speed-limit-setting approach and have technical products that are ready for stakeholder input.

WHAT IS THE BENEFIT?

Increases the safety of the users of the State's roadway system, which includes motorists, bicyclists, and pedestrians. Furthermore, this research project directly supports Goal 1 of the Caltrans Strategic Management Plan (2015-2020), namely to "Provide a safe transportation system for workers and users and promote health through active transportation and reduced pollution in communities," as well as its associated strategic objective to "Reduce user fatalities and serious injuries by adopting a 'Toward Zero Deaths' practice." This project is also aligned with Director's Policy 36, which adopted the Safe System Approach to achieve the vision of zero roadway deaths or serious injuries by 2050.

WHAT IS THE PROGRESS TO DATE?

- Task 3: Determine safe and appropriate speed limits
 - Compared existing and proposed speed limits by movement-place classification
 - Develop recommended base speed limit and range for each movement-place classification
 - Evaluated the accuracy of classification method and identified opportunities to potentially improve the place clustering methodology
- Task 4: Recommend risk assessment method
 - Began compiling risk assessment literature review
 - Developed a methodology for integrating risk assessment with where a recommended speed limit falls within the movement and place range
- Task 5: Recommendations for Next Steps
 - Developed a strategic perspective on how a movement and place framework might be implemented in California, including stakeholder mapping
 - Interviewed experts in New Zealand who played key roles in the movement and place approach to inform California approach
 - Began drafting task 5 chapter