

Stoned driving is uncharted territory

By Ralph Vartabedian, Los Angeles Times

It was his green tongue that helped give away Jimmy Candido Flores when police arrived at the fatal accident scene near Chico.



Flores had run off the road and killed a jogger, Carrie Jean Holliman, a 56-year-old Chico elementary school teacher. California Highway Patrol officers thought he might be impaired and conducted a sobriety examination. Flores' tongue had a green coat typical of heavy marijuana users and a later test showed he had pot, as well as other drugs, in his blood.

After pleading guilty to manslaughter, Flores, a medical marijuana user, was sentenced in February to 10 years and 8 months in prison.

Holliman's death and others like it across the nation hint at what experts say is an unrecognized crisis: stoned drivers.

The most recent assessment by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, based on random roadside checks, found that 16.3% of all drivers nationwide at night were on various legal and illegal impairing drugs, half them high on marijuana.

In California alone, nearly 1,000 deaths and injuries each year are blamed directly on drugged drivers, according to CHP data, and law enforcement puts much of the blame on the rapid growth of medical marijuana use in the last decade. Fatalities in crashes where drugs were the primary cause and alcohol was not involved jumped 55% over the 10 years ending in 2009.

“Marijuana is a significant and important contributing factor in a growing number of fatal accidents,” said Gil Kerlikowske, director of National Drug Control Policy in the White House and former Seattle police chief. “There is no question, not only from the data but from what I have heard in my career as a law enforcement officer.”

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