

Highway patrol focusing on I-80 from SF to NJ

By Gary Richards, San Jose Mercury News

In the first crackdown of its kind, highway patrol officers from the Bay Area to New Jersey will join forces in an effort to prevent any fatalities on the 2,909 miles of Interstate 80 from Wednesday through July 31.

"For an entire week, that would be amazing," said Jaime Coffee, a spokeswoman for the California Highway Patrol. "I don't know if it has happened before."

Someone dies in a collision every eight days on I-80 in California.

Of those fatalities, 30 percent involved the failure to wear a seat belt, 27 percent are alcohol-related, 22 percent are speed-related and 4 percent are attributed to distracted driving.

From 2001 to 2011, there were more than 77,842 collisions, or an average of 21 crashes each day, and 498 people or nearly 50 a year killed on I-80 in the state.

The latest push, dubbed the "I-80 Challenge," was organized by the Iowa State Patrol after research identified an increase in traffic fatalities during the summer vacation period on the nation's main east-west route.

For California, summer also means heavier than usual traffic from San Francisco to Reno and Lake Tahoe. Agencies in Utah, Iowa, Illinois, Ohio and the more heavily populated eastern part of the country also say a surge in traffic can lead to more mayhem this time of year.

While I-80 is a key link between the East Coast and West

Coast, it often bottlenecks down to two lanes each way. And in less-populated areas, drivers often go too fast in their haste to reach vacation destinations.

“Speeders, sleepy drivers, too much traffic – those are my big worries,” said James Delgado, of San Jose, who makes several trips each summer to Reno and Lake Tahoe. “It would be good to see a few more CHP cars out there, too.”

Coffee said the CHP will focus on drivers not wearing seat belts, those going too fast for conditions and anyone who has been drinking.

“Much of this will be educational,” Coffee said. “We’re just trying to get the word out about being safe this time of year.”