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Survey of California Drivers Shows Fourteen Percent Testing Positive for Drugs

Sacramento, CA – Drugs that can affect driving were found in one of every seven weekend nighttime drivers in California, according to the first-ever statewide roadside survey of alcohol and drug use by drivers. The survey results announced today by the California Office of Traffic Safety (OTS) showed more drivers tested positive for drugs that may impair driving (14 percent) than did for alcohol (7.3 percent). Of the drugs, marijuana was most prevalent, at 7.4 percent, slightly more than alcohol.

“This federally funded survey is the first of its kind ever undertaken by a state,” said Christopher J. Murphy, Director of the Office of Traffic Safety. “These results reinforce our belief that driving after consuming potentially impairing drugs is a serious and growing problem.”

The survey also noted that 7.3 percent of drivers tested positive for alcohol. Of those testing positive for alcohol, 23 percent also tested positive for at least one other drug. This combination can increase the effect of both substances. Illegal drugs were found in the systems of 4.6 percent of drivers, and 4.6 percent also tested positive for prescription or over-the-counter medications that may impair driving. More than one quarter (26.5 percent) of drivers testing positive for marijuana also tested positive for at least one other drug. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has reported that, when looking at drivers who were killed in motor vehicle crashes in 2010 in California, 30 percent tested positive for legal and/or illegal drugs, a percentage that has increased since 2006.

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“Drugged driving poses a serious threat to public safety,” said Gil Kerlikowske, Director of National Drug Control Policy. “We commend the California Office of Traffic Safety for shedding light on this growing problem and for educating Californians about the prevalence of this danger. We look forward to working with California and other states to raise awareness about this important issue and continue to take action to make our roadways safer.”

Drug-impaired driving is often under-reported and under-recognized and toxicology testing is expensive. To address this emerging problem, the California Office of Traffic Safety is funding programs to increase the number of officers trained to detect drug-impaired drivers, special District Attorneys dedicated to drug-impaired driving cases, and new laboratory drug-testing equipment.

Governor Edmund G. Brown Jr. recently signed AB 2552 into law, which moves each of the DUI categories – alcohol, drugs and alcohol plus drugs – into separate sections of the vehicle code. This change will help greatly in data collection and subsequent responses to the new and more detailed information.

OTS and the California Highway Patrol are working together to provide officers statewide with specialized training to detect and apprehend drug-impaired drivers. One such program is called Advanced Roadside Impaired Driving Enforcement (ARIDE). More than 1,600 officers from police departments across the state have attended ARIDE training. In addition, there are more than 1,200 in the field who have received more advanced training and are qualified as Drug Recognition Experts (DRE), more than in any other state. DUI checkpoint operations across the state are often administered by officers specially trained to detect drug-impaired drivers.

District Attorney offices in 20 counties have created special “vertical prosecution” teams that will follow drug-impaired driving cases from arrest through trial. In addition, Regional Traffic Safety Resource Prosecutors are providing training to District Attorney offices on how to successfully prosecute drug impaired driving cases. Several counties have received funding to purchase or upgrade to state-of-the-art drug testing equipment.

Over 1,300 drivers voluntarily agreed to provide breath and/or saliva samples at roadside locations set up in nine California cities. The samples were collected between 10:00 p.m. and 3:00 a.m. on Friday and Saturday nights, the peak times of impaired driving. Breath samples were examined for alcohol, while saliva samples were tested for THC (the active ingredient in marijuana), major illegal drugs, plus prescription and over-the-counter medications that may adversely affect driving.

The survey helps supply data needs identified in the California Strategic Highway Safety Plan, a dynamic action plan developed by federal, state and local government agencies, as well as organizations and advocacy groups dedicated to all aspects of traffic safety.

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