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Oregon rates 14th for drunken-driving deaths

Safety - Experts cite dangers of alcohol for teens and advise a family contract on car rules

Tuesday, November 29, 2005

JOHN SNELL

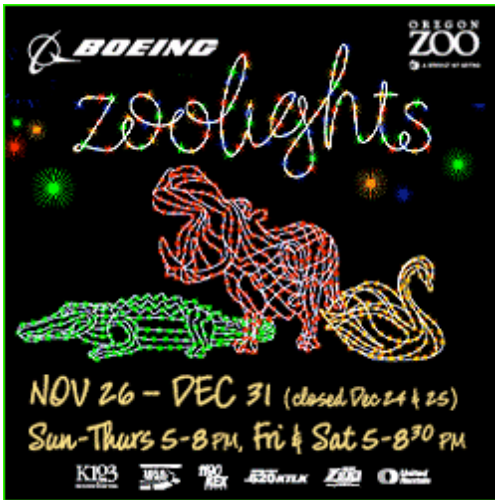
Oregon was named Monday as one of the 15 deadliest states for drunken driving accidents by the National Safety Council.

The annual list is issued in cooperation with End Needless Death on Our Roadways, a physician-led traffic safety group. States make the list when more than 41 percent of fatal traffic crashes are found to involve alcohol.

Oregon was 14th on the list, which also included Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C., with 43.64 percent of traffic fatalities in 2004 involving alcohol. The state with the highest percentage was Rhode Island, with more than half of fatal accidents -- 50.60 percent -- involving alcohol.

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The state with the lowest percentage was Utah, with 24.32 percent of fatal traffic accidents found to be alcohol-related.

The list was released a day after a Sunday morning traffic accident killed three teenagers along Southwest Scholls Ferry Road. The cause of the crash has not been determined, but police said they are investigating whether alcohol use played a role.

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John Ulczycki, a spokesman for the National Safety Council in Greater Chicago, said alcohol use is especially deadly among teenage drivers.

"When teenagers died in a crash -- and there are about 6,000 a year -- we can usually tell you the circumstances and how it occurs," he said. "The pattern is replayed all over the country: There are usually other passengers in the car. They are usually not wearing seat belts. And in about a third of the cases, alcohol is involved."

The National Safety Council and End Needless Death on Our Roadways drafted a formal contract between parents and teenage drivers in which the teens agree to basic elements of responsible behavior.

When they sign the contract, teens are expected to acknowledge that traffic accidents are the leading cause of death among people their age, agree not to drink or use drugs while driving, and agree to wear seat belts.

The contract also lays out restrictions placed on teens by their parents on things such as having passengers in the car, driving after dark or respecting curfew hours that have been set for them. It spells out the loss of driving privileges set by their parents if rules are broken.

Ulczycki said the contract helps make clear the consequences of violating the rules of adulthood. It also can help parents lay down the law when the rules are broken.

"We started the written contract about a year ago," he said. "When it comes to teen crashes, so many parents don't know what they don't know."

"These restrictions are principles we know work," Ulczycki said. "What we're saying is, 'Let's apply this to the family.'"

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