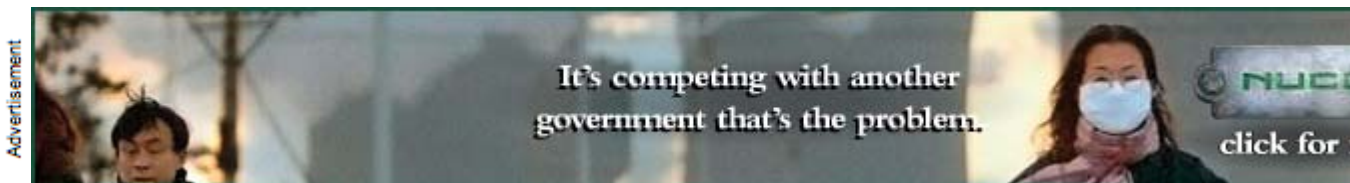


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Systems warn drivers of deer in headlights

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By Jed Carlson, Daily telegram via AP, April 2004

A pair of deer cross highway 53 near Hawthorne, Wis., as the sun sets. More than a million collisions between vehicles and deer, the largest wild animal most often involved in such accidents, occur each year, says a research ecologist at Montana State University.

By Charisse Jones, USA TODAY

Several states plan to test roadside sensor systems that can detect large animals and warn drivers in a bid to reduce sometimes-deadly collisions between motor vehicles and deer, moose and other wildlife.

One system, developed in Yellowstone National Park as part of a study paid for by 15 states and the Federal Highway Administration, is promising, some transportation officials and researchers say. At least three states are planning to implement it or similar technology as soon as next month.

"The number of accidents with large animals has been increasing in most regions in North America over the last couple decades," says Marcel Huijser, the study's chief investigator and a research ecologist at Montana State University in Bozeman.

More than a million collisions between vehicles and deer, the largest wild animal most often involved in such accidents, occur each year, Huijser says. Those accidents kill more than 200 motorists, injure 29,000 others and cause property damage of more than \$1 billion.

Spikes in the wildlife population, more vehicles on the road and a growing number of people moving into once-rural areas are increasing the risk of such accidents.

"More deer and sprawling suburbia add up to more chances for these crashes," says Russ Rader, spokesman for the Arlington, Va.-based Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, a research group funded by auto insurers.

A consortium of states funded a six-year study, conducted by Montana State University's Western Transportation Institute. It enlisted companies to develop more efficient ways to warn drivers that a moose, deer or other large animal was near. The detection systems cost an average \$31,300 per mile per year.

One system, developed by Sensor Technologies and Systems (STS) in Scottsdale, Ariz., uses transmitters and microwave radio signals along a 1-mile stretch of U.S. 191 in Yellowstone. When a large animal crosses a signal's beam, beacons flash on top of signs to warn motorists they could encounter wildlife.

States preparing to use that system or others include:

- New Mexico.** By next spring, the state will install two animal-detection systems along state Highway 333. "New Mexico is a fairly rural state, and you can hit large game animals pretty much anywhere," says Mark Watson of the state's Department of Game and Fish. "There's more pressure on wildlife as their habitats shrink and become fragmented."

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•**Arizona.** State officials plan to install a similar system by November, the height of fall migration for elk and deer. Fencing will funnel the animals into a 200-foot crossing zone on Arizona Highway 260 in the central part of the state. Infrared cameras will transmit their images to a computer that will determine whether a big animal is present. Software will send a signal that lights up warning signs.

"The problem isn't going away; it's going to get worse and worse as more and more people move to the West," says Norris Dodd, wildlife research biologist for the state's Game and Fish Department.

•**California.** Northern California will begin using the technology by next August, says Katie Petersen, spokeswoman for the California Department of Transportation. Eight detection stations and two warning signs will be set up along U.S. Highway 101 in Humboldt County, she says.

•**Nevada.** The state, which relies mostly on fencing to separate animals and vehicles, hopes to implement the system created by STS within the next three years, says Jay Van Sickle, senior project coordinator with the Nevada Department of Transportation.

"We're trying to reduce the crashes, but we're also trying to save the wildlife population," Van Sickle says.

Rader of the Insurance Institute says the animal-detection systems could prove more effective than traditional signs warning that deer are present.

"People largely ignore the standard 'deer crossing' signs," he says. "But if they know the sign lights up only if deer are present, they may be more likely to react and slow down."

Some states also have used fencing and animal underpasses and overpasses to try to prevent accidents. Those methods are limited, however, because of their expense, Huijser says.

Over the next two years, researchers will look at whether the system at Yellowstone results in reduced vehicle speed or fewer collisions, Huijser says.

Still, it will take more than new equipment to solve the problem. "The technology is one aspect," says Arizona's Dodd. "But to make it truly work, we've got to rely on the motorist."

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