

Safer Workplaces for Alberta's Highway Workers

Issue

Amending Alberta's *Traffic Safety Act* to allow the use of better illumination signals and consistent protections for all roadside workers would reduce risk of injury and harm to Albertans and motorists.

Background

Illumination that protects vulnerable short-duration roadside workers

Roads are crucial to Alberta's economic growth and development. Our road network benefits citizens, providing access to employment, social, health, and education services. The provincial government has voiced its commitment to ensuring the safety of Alberta's workforce, including those who maintain our roadways.

Warning (flashing) lights on Alberta highway workers' vehicles are one of the measures intended to keep workers safe. The purpose of flashing lights is to warn oncoming motorists of a potential hazard ahead and to manage driver behaviour when approaching and entering the area. Research has shown the right color and configuration of warning lights on vehicles can save lives.

Many different colours of flashing lights are permitted in Alberta and listed in the *Traffic Safety Act* Vehicle Equipment Regulation. This regulation specifies the types of vehicles that may use flashing lights as well as colour and location of lights on the vehicle. Multiple studies have shown that different colours and colour combinations of warning lights are more effective at attracting driver attention. For example, research from the Transportation Association of Canada shows that combinations with yellow, blue, and red are more effective than amber alone to improve safety; they are more visible and do a better job at warning drivers of a potential hazard. Blue is the most conspicuous colour day and night.

Currently in Alberta, tow trucks as well as vehicles and equipment used for very short-duration roadside projects are regulated to be equipped with amber flashing lights to warn oncoming motorists of roadside workers. Amber lights, however, are less visible and have become so commonplace that they are no longer effective in this type of hazardous environment. For example, amber is used on moving farm equipment, garbage trucks, landscaping vehicles, road signs, and more.

The Alberta Motor Association and the tow truck industry recommend that the Alberta government permits the use of blue and amber lights on tow trucks. Several jurisdictions in Canada already permit the use of blue flashing lights on various categories of roadside vehicles in addition to emergency vehicles. Three also allow blue lights for use on stationary roadside vehicles: Saskatchewan (tow trucks), Yukon (highway maintenance vehicles), and Newfoundland (government public works vehicles).

Amending "slow down, move over" legislation to better protect vulnerable highway workers

Emergency vehicles and tow trucks with flashing lights are protected by Alberta's *slow down move over* law.^{1,2} However, stationary workers conducting "very short duration work" (projects up to 30 minutes, as

¹ Includes fire, police, ambulance, tow trucks, and public utility gas disconnection

unit <https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=1898137BBC21F-9DA9-0B64-AC83FC1CDBA00788>

² AB Gov 2020 <https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=7578869C9FD4D-C801-6B8D-DF6CA30A29B743E8>

defined by Alberta Transportation) are excluded.^{3,4} Among those excluded under this law are highway maintenance workers, sign installers, line locaters, surveyors, and survey crews. In 2015, British Columbia modified its “slow down, move over” legislation to include all roadside workers displaying a flashing light on their vehicle.

Unlike other provinces in Canada with similar legislation, in Alberta, this law also only applies to the lane immediately beside the stopped vehicle rather than all lanes travelling in the same direction. This creates motorist confusion and increases risks to all on the road. Consequently, each day, thousands of roadside workers building and repairing critical infrastructure to support Alberta’s economy are at risk of being struck by vehicles legally passing roadside workers at high speed.

According to the Alberta Motor Association, the problem with the rule applying to only one lane of traffic is that many drivers are unclear whether or not they are to slow down. This confusion causes inconsistent behaviour and significant speed variations when approaching roadside worksites. Further hazards arise when vehicles slowing down attempt to merge into a lane with fast-moving vehicles. To reduce the related risks, stakeholders are increasingly calling on legislators to include the requirement for traffic in both directions to adhere to “slow down, move over” legislation.

Conclusion

Better road safety is driven by evidence-based practices. These practices include allowing effective warning light colour combinations and including very short-duration roadside workers in “slow down, move over” legislation. Making these amendments to Alberta’s legislation and regulations will make roads safer for all Alberta roadside workers, supporting safe and well-maintained transportation networks in the province.

The Alberta Chambers of Commerce recommends the Government of Alberta:

1. Amends the Vehicle Equipment Regulation under Alberta’s *Traffic Safety Act* to allow tow trucks as well as vehicles/equipment used for very short-duration highway projects to be equipped with another colour of warning light in combination with amber; and
2. Amends Section 115 of Alberta’s *Traffic Safety Act* to:
 - a. Provide stationary very short-duration workers conducting roadside work have the same protection as other highway workers already included under the Act; and,
 - b. Require vehicles in all traffic lanes in the same direction of travel slow down and move over, with consideration given to include opposite direction traffic on two-lane, undivided highways.

³“Work that occupies a fixed location for up to 30 minutes...” and “rarely uses traffic control devices due to the time involved to set them up.” <https://www.alberta.ca/traffic-accommodation-in-work-zones.aspx>

⁴ <https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/driving-and-transportation/driving/roadsafetybc/strategy/road-safety-strategy-update-vision-zero.pdf>

