



A suspected drunk driver allegedly collided with several vehicles on U.S. 2 on Aug. 21, 2021 near Chain Lake Road in Monroe. (Monroe Police Department)

As death toll rises, push to lower the legal limit for driving drunk begins

Washington could join Utah with toughest standard in the nation. Change concerns wine and hospitality industries.

By Jerry Cornfield

Tuesday, January 17, 2023 11:09am | **LOCAL NEWS**

OLYMPIA — Lawmakers set out Monday to lower the legal limit for driving drunk in Washington.

The move comes as deadly crashes involving drivers who had been drinking alcohol are at levels not seen in more than a decade.

Washington recorded 670 traffic fatalities in 2021 of which 202 people died in crashes involving an alcohol-impaired driver — the highest number since 2009, according to [data compiled by the Washington State Traffic Safety Commission](#).

The answer crafted by Democratic Sens. John Lovick, of Mill Creek, and Marko Liias, of Everett, is [Senate Bill 5002](#) to reduce the maximum blood alcohol concentration, or BAC, for drivers from 0.08% to 0.05%.

At that mark, Washington would join Utah with the toughest standard in the nation.

“Our roads are not as safe as they should be and they are not as safe as they could be,” Lovick, a retired state trooper, said at a public hearing on the bill in the Senate Law and Justice Committee. Drunk driving is the offense and the state Legislature needs to be the defense, he said.

Gov. Jay Inslee is behind it. So too are state and local law enforcement, the National Traffic Safety Board, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, the Washington Traffic Safety Commission, the state Department of Health and the Washington Trucking Association.

“There’s one substance that can lead to drunk driving in Washington state. It’s not sunflower seeds. It’s alcohol,” James McMahan, policy director for the Washington Association of Sheriff’s and Police Chiefs told a Senate panel Monday. “We think this bill can save lives.”

Several speakers said since Utah enacted the change in 2019, its had fewer crashes involving impaired drivers and fewer fatalities but no increase in arrests. And the revised standard didn’t hurt the bottom line of the hospitality and tourism industries, they said.

On Monday, Julia Gorton, representing the Washington Hospitality Association, and Josh McDonald, executive director of the Washington Wine Institute, a statewide trade association, testified against the bill.

Gorton pointed out that alcohol servers can be held liable for over serving a customer. Lowering the limit would puts thousands at a new risk “because there’s no discernible way to detect” intoxication at 0.05%.

McDonald expressed concern the bill could curtail the ability to provide wine tasting and, in turn, lead to fewer sales.

“We believe strongly in responsible serving and train our staff to not overserve customers,” he said. “Without the ability to offer on-premise tasting ... Washington wineries will not be able to compete.”

Most speakers focused on the potential to reduce deadly crashes.

“This is legislation that will save lives,” said Linda Thompson of the Washington Association for Substance Misuse and Violence Prevention.

The committee is [scheduled to vote on the bill Thursday morning](#).

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