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Highways hazardous all holiday week

By Ginny MacDonald

Thanksgiving holiday highway crashes, historically highest on Wednesdays, are now spread across the week, according to researchers at the University of Alabama CARE Research and Development Laboratory.

A study of 2005 data showed that, while there were the same number of crashes, more happened on the Mondays before and after Thanksgiving than on the day before the holiday.

Weather was a factor: The 2005 Mondays were wet and Wednesday was clear.

"The effect of the weather shows that if you have the flexibility of when to drive, you might choose to avoid bad weather days," said Allen Parrish, director of UA's CARE lab.

The American Automobile Association estimates a total of 38.2 million Americans will travel more than 50 miles from home this Thanksgiving, a 2.7 percent increase from last year. Eighty-two percent of those travelers, or 31.3 million, will go by motor vehicle.

Clay Ingram of AAA-Alabama said there was a pre-holiday bump in gas prices last week. The decline in the past year, though, about 9 cents nationally, will likely encourage more people to take to the road.

"They might have forgone the summer family vacations because of high gas prices, but extended family get-togethers and lower gas prices will encourage Americans to get back on the road," he said.

Gas prices nationwide are averaging \$2.23 for a gallon of self-serve regular gasoline, Ingram said. Alabama gas prices are averaging \$2.15 a gallon for regular unleaded. Birmingham area prices Friday ranged from \$2.01 a gallon to \$2.15.

Air travel will also be heavy with more passengers than last year. AAA expects 4.8 million (12.5 percent of Thanksgiving travelers) to go by airplane, up 3.2 percent from last year.

Travelers will face higher prices for hotels, airfares and car rentals, according to AAA's Leisure Travel Index. Holiday hotel rates are up 16 percent for AAA-Rated Three Diamond hotels.

Rental car rates have increased 21 percent. Air fares are up an average of 4 percent from last year.

The greatest number of Thanksgiving auto travelers will originate in the Southeast with 9.1 million, followed by the West, 7.2 million; Midwest, 6.7 million; the Great Lakes, 6.2 million; and the Northeast, 2.4 million.

Some 69 percent of Thanksgiving travelers will stay with friends or relatives.

AAA travel research is based on a survey of 1,500 people.

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