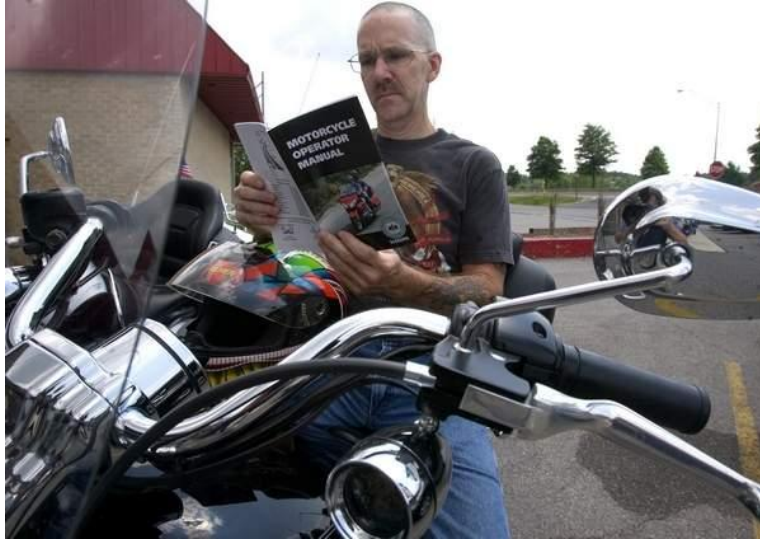


Legislators, safety advocates want change in motorcycle licensing laws



Matt McKean/TimesDaily

Jeff Stowe sits on his motorcycle and looks over the motorcycle operator's manual for Alabama. Motorcycle riders don't have to take a driver's test, just a written one, to obtain a license in Alabama.

By Trevor Stokes
Staff Writer

Alabama is the only state where a person can get a motorcycle license without ever sitting on a motorcycle.

A written test is the only requirement.

Legislators and motorcycle safety advocates are pushing to require graduated licenses and mandating testing that includes riding.

“Issuing a motorcycle license with a written test and no skills test is just setting people up for failure. The lack for a mandate of training and education can be directly linked to reports of accidents,” said Richard Randolph, Alabama Motorcycle Safety program manager. “Sixty-nine percent of all motorcycle-involved accidents, the cause was the motorcycle operator. That's steady year in, year out.”

This week, sponsors said they hope a new motorcycle-licensing bill will hit the state Senate floor for a vote.

Rep. Allen Farley, R-Jefferson, and eight co-sponsors are behind the House version of the bill. It would require future motorcycle licenses to include a written test and a skills test for ages 14-17. It also would introduce a graduated driver's license law that would restrict motorcycle operations for ages 14-17.

In an email, Farley said the Department of Public Safety asked him to sponsor the bill. He spent 26 years in law enforcement, including seven years as assistant sheriff in the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office.

"I suppose DPS thought I would appreciate a bill that would have the potential to save lives. I truly believe it will," he wrote.

Forty-five states now require motorcycle safety courses before a test is taken, Randolph said.

The latest state to adopt this requirement is Florida, where new motorcycle riders are required to take a safety course. Floridians already with motorcycle licenses were grandfathered in.

"It's fair to say that the class is helping," said Ann Howard, press secretary for the Florida Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles.

Between 2007, the year before the law came into effect, and 2010, the fatality rate for motorcycle drivers nearly halved, according to data from the Florida Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles office. The data from 2010 is preliminary, Howard said.

In the sunshine state, the number of motorcycle driver fatalities decreased to 330 in 2010 from 517 in 2007, even as ridership increased 16 percent or by 145,972 new riders.

The data also reflects the rate of crashes, which decreased 69 percent from 2007 to 2010.

"The numbers are going down and they have been for years," Howard said.

In Alabama, the number of motorcycle fatalities has decreased, too, according to the Center for Advanced Public Safety at the University of Alabama.

Motorcycle fatalities skyrocketed in the mid-2000s; from 43 deaths in 2000 before peaking at 105 deaths in 2006.

By 2009, the number of deaths decreased to 77 total.

The data also show similar trends for injuries and the total number of crashes that involve motorcycles.

Riders aged 30-34 suffered the most annual motorcycle fatalities, according to Center for Advanced Public Safety data.

A factor appears to be that motorcycles became heavier and more powerful.

"The majority of our riders are re-entry riders," Randolph said. "The performance levels are so much more than when these people were riding (in high school)."

Depending on whether the state legislation passes, it will take years to determine its effect on safety.

The Alabama Department of Public Safety has a policy of not commenting on proposed legislation, said spokeswoman Robyn Litchfield.

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