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FLORIDA TOPS NATIONAL SAFETY BELT USAGE RATE FOR FIRST TIME

TALLAHASSEE – Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos announced today that statewide safety belt use reached a record 85.2 percent this year following FDOT's 2009 *Click It or Ticket* safety belt campaign and the passage of the state's primary enforcement law. The national safety belt use rate for 2009 is 84 percent.

"Fastening their safety belt is the easiest thing drivers and passengers can do to reduce the risk of tragedy or serious injury during a vehicle crash," said Governor Charlie Crist.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimates with the approval of its primary safety belt law, Florida will save 124 lives, prevent 1,733 serious injuries, and save \$408 million in associated costs each year. Passage of the primary law means law enforcement can now stop drivers for the sole reason that someone is not wearing a safety belt.

"The increase in safety belt use is great news for the people of Florida," said FDOT Secretary Stephanie Kopelousos. "There is little doubt the statewide efforts to pass a primary enforcement law played a vital role in reaching this all time high. However, there is still much to be done to convince everyone to wear their safety belt, every trip, every time."

"Safety belts are the single most effective piece of safety equipment in a vehicle, and each driver has a responsibility to ensure that everyone is properly buckled-up," said Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles (DHSMV) Executive Director, Julie L. Jones. "Educating motorists and enforcing Florida's safety belt laws will help safeguard motorists throughout the Sunshine State."

Just five days after Florida's law became primary on June 30, 2009, an observational survey of vehicles was undertaken. The results showed Florida's rate had topped the national average for the first time. The numbers are encouraging especially considering the vast majority of the survey counties increased their safety belt usage rate over last year.

The survey also followed the focused *Click It or Ticket* campaign that took place May 11-June 1. During that time, law enforcement agencies increased patrols and traffic safety efforts while practicing a zero tolerance policy for people not wearing their safety belts. The Florida Highway Patrol (FHP) and local law enforcement agencies are once again commended for their dedication to saving lives and promoting safety belt use. Also instrumental in this successful campaign to save lives were the numerous grass roots efforts that took place across the state to educate Florida's residents and its visitors on the benefits of always buckling up.

A breakdown of the 2009 safety belt usage rates is available on the FDOT website: www.dot.state.fl.us/Safety/