



# Kansas LTAP Fact Sheet

A Service of University of Kansas Transportation Center for Road, Street & Bridge Agencies

## Tips for Driving Safely on Gravel Roads

By Norm Bowers

“In Kansas there are almost 100,000 miles of unpaved roads. These unpaved roads with a gravel or dirt surface are the predominant road type in rural areas of Kansas. Unpaved roads are usually maintained by a county or township.

Unpaved roads present their own special road safety challenges. The major issue is traction. Driving on loose gravel is more difficult than driving on pavement because your tires don't have the traction needed to give you stable control. Throw speed into the mix and you have a formula for trouble.

Surface materials, weather, traffic volumes, and vehicle weights can change an unpaved road's condition very quickly. That's why it's so important to approach unpaved roads with caution each and every time you encounter one. It may not be the same road you traveled this morning.

### Here are some tips to decrease your risk when driving on unpaved roads

- **Slow down**

Many drivers encounter problems when they leave a paved surface for an unpaved one. The first thing to do is to slow down. Your vehicle is going to handle differently when it moves from one surface to another. The gravel may be loose or it may be hard-packed; you want to know how your vehicle handles before you speed up.

- **Be ready for skids**

A vehicle can become difficult to handle in heavy



Photo by Norm Bowers

gravel. If the vehicle starts to skid, remove the cause of the skid by releasing your accelerator or brakes. As you release them, look where you want to go, and steer the vehicle in this direction. If the tires on one side of the vehicle go off the road edge, do not immediately turn the wheel to try to get back on the road. Let your foot off the gas and steer the car so it follows the edge of the road. Slowly turn the steering wheel to gradually guide the tire back to the road.

- **Avoid sudden changes in direction**

Sudden changes in direction such as swerving to avoid an object or animal on the road can be particularly dangerous, especially on loose gravel or at excessive speed. Be alert to upcoming hazards.

- **Accelerate and brake slowly**

Accelerate and brake slowly and reduce your speed when approaching intersections, curves and hills. Always drive at a speed that allows you to stop easily for any hazard. Be considerate, too. As you

approach other vehicles, slow down and move over to the right so you can pass each other safely.

- **Increase following distance**

Even if the visibility is good and the road is hard-packed, stay at least six seconds behind other vehicles. Increase this distance when conditions are less than perfect. This reduces the danger from a cloud of dust obscuring vision or flying rocks damaging headlights and windshields.

Photo by Norm Bowers



- **Intersections:**

Many rural intersections do not have STOP signs that assign right-of-way. Do not enter an intersection until you are sure there is no conflicting cross traffic. Remember the saying: Don't See? Don't Go.

- **Avoid windrows**

Maintenance material is sometimes piled or windrowed along the edge of the road. This material is loose and if tires contact a windrow it can cause a vehicle to lose control.

- **Watch out for a grader**

A motor grader routinely smooths the surface of unpaved roads. During the smoothing operation a windrow may be located in the driving path. Avoid crossing the windrow except at low speeds. Graders back up routinely, so do not follow too closely as your vehicle may be in the grader operator's blind spot. Cross the windrow and pass the grader only at locations where adequate sight distance is available to see approaching traffic.

- **Speed Limits**

The maximum speed limit on county and township roads is 55 MPH unless otherwise posted. However, Kansas law also states that a motorist must drive at a speed that is reasonable and prudent at all times by considering other traffic, road and weather conditions, dangers at intersections and any other conditions that affect safety. In other words, drivers are expected to use good judgment in selecting their speed. On an unpaved road, that means taking the current condition of the road surface into consideration. The best advice: Slow down.

\* Speed limit - KSA 8-1558

