Kansas
LTAP Fact Sheet
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Let Me Count the Ways

By Lisa Harris

The federal deadline for having a sign management system in place that includes an assessment method for retroreflectivity is less than two years away: January 22, 2012. This is the first step in assuring compliance of all traffic signs with federal minimum standards for retroreflectivity. These standards are designed to improve safety and save lives on all public roads in the US. Replacement of noncompliant signs is required by 2015 or 2018, depending on the type of sign.

According to Gary Rosewicz, Kansas County Highway Association liaison to FHWA, not all Kansas counties have these deadlines on their radar. "We're all over the map," he said. "There are a couple of counties that popped for the meters and others that are not even thinking about an assessment method right now. Some are in a state of denial."

If your county, city or township has not yet chosen a retroreflectivity assessment method as part of a sign management plan, this article is for you. This requirement is not going to go away, and it carries serious implications for future sign-related litigation if you choose to ignore it. The good news is: There are a several options for assessing retroreflectivity. Buying a retroreflectometer may or may not be right for your jurisdiction. It's important to understand the pros and cons of the methods available and choose the one(s) best for your situation.

Five options

In implementing an assessment or management method for your signs, your agency has the following options, per the *Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices*. You can use one option or a combination of them.

1) Visual Nighttime Inspection. Requires a trained sign inspector over 60 years of age driving an SUV or truck. FHWA has identified a few options for procedures for this method.
2) Measured Sign Retroreflectivity. A retroreflectometer is placed against each sign to measure sign retroreflectivity. Signs with below-minimum levels should be replaced.
3) Expected Sign Life. When signs are installed the installation date is labeled or recorded. The age of the sign is compared to the expected sign life. The expected sign life is based on the experience of sign retroreflectivity degradation in a geographic area compared to the minimum levels. Signs older than the expected life should be replaced.
4) Blanket Replacement. All signs in a given area or of a given type are replaced at specified intervals. This eliminates the need to assess retroreflectivity or track the life of individual signs. The replacement interval is based on expected sign life, compared to the minimum levels, for the shortest-life material used on the affected signs.
5) Control Signs. Replacement of signs in the field is based on the performance of a sample of control signs in the maintenance yard or in the field. All signs represented by the control sample should be replaced before the retroreflectivity levels of the control sample reach minimum levels.

Methods developed and based on an engineering study can also be used.

How to decide which methods are right for you? You have a few options here, too.

First, we highly recommend reading FHWA's *Sign Retroreflectivity Guidebook*, which is the source for information in this article. The Guide is specifically designed for small agencies. It includes a spiral-bound guide and a

DVD with some interactive features, including an easy-to-use decision tool for choosing an assessment method, based on your particular road system's characteristics. [If you don't have a computer available to run the DVD, call us at 785-864-2590 and we'll run the decision tool for you.]

Another way to make your decision is to find out how others made theirs. At the Kansas County Highway Association's Spring meeting, four counties spoke during a panel discussion about which method they were gearing up to use. All of them were planning to base their programs primarily on Expected Sign Life or Blanket Replacement. An advantage to those approaches is ease of budgeting; sign replacement is more predictable, because you will know in advance which signs you are going to replace.

FHWA's Guide contains an excellent article on how Pierce County, Washington, chose their sign retroreflectivity assessment method. Theirs includes elements of Measured Retroreflectivity, Expected Life, and primarily, Control Signs. See also the article in this issue on the blend of methods Miami County, Kansas, is already starting to use.

A third option is to talk with experts on the topic in Kansas. Norm Bowers with the Kansas Association of Counties (785-272-2585) and Tom Mulinazzi with Kansas LTAP (785-865-2928) can help point you in the right direction.

We hope this article will help you get your sign management and retroreflectivity program under way.

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If you'd rather just turn your sign management and retroreflectivity maintenance over to someone else, 3M is offering a program to do just that. It's pricey, but includes some efficiencies because it's a national program. Learn more at http://solutions.3m.com and search for "Traffic Sign Installations and Upgrade Programs."