



# History of Idaho's stop sign law

December 2008

by Ray Thomas

In Idaho, bicyclists have been allowed by statute since 1982 to approach stop signs and roll through, after first yielding the right of way. Bicyclists in Idaho are also allowed to turn right at red lights without stopping, so long as the bicyclist first yields to other vehicles. In 2005 the Idaho legislature further changed the law to allow bicyclists to stop, yield to other vehicles and then travel through a red light.



The original Idaho yield law was introduced as HB 541 during a comprehensive revision of Idaho Traffic laws in 1982. The bicycle provision was discussed during committee hearings. Concerns were raised that some children on bicycles might not be as careful at stop signs if stopping were not required.

The legislature added a provision amending the bill to provide options for local bicycling education for children and passed the bill.

In 1988, Idaho undertook a “comprehensive recodification” of the motor vehicle law, according to Kristin Ford, the Idaho Legislative Reference Librarian. Senate Bill 1245 renumbered the bicycle provision as Idaho Code 49-720 and deleted the education provision.

In 2005, Idaho law enforcement officials asked Representative Joyce Broadsword (R—Sandpoint) to introduce a law to clarify that bicyclists must stop at a red light before proceeding. They felt clarification was necessary because the 1982 Idaho law had allowed bicyclists at a red light, “after slowing to a reasonable speed” to “cautiously make a right hand turn or a left-hand turn onto a one-way highway” without stopping. Law enforcement requested that as a safety measure, bicyclists be required to first stop at a red light before yielding and rolling straight through, or turning left at an intersection. Senate Bill 1131 was passed and became effective in 2006.

Current Idaho law provides:

**49-720. STOPPING — TURN AND STOP SIGNALS. (1) A person operating a bicycle or human-powered vehicle approaching a stop**

sign shall slow down and, if required for safety, stop before entering the intersection. After slowing to a reasonable speed or stopping, the person shall yield the right-of-way to any vehicle in the intersection or approaching on another highway so closely as to constitute an immediate hazard during the time the person is moving across or within the intersection or junction of highways, except that a person after slowing to a reasonable speed and yielding the right-of-way if required, may cautiously make a turn or proceed through the intersection without stopping.

(2) A person operating a bicycle or human-powered vehicle approaching a steady red traffic control light shall stop before entering the intersection and shall yield to all other traffic. Once the person has yielded, he may proceed through the steady red light with caution. Provided however, that a person after slowing to a reasonable speed and yielding the right-of-way if required, may cautiously make a right-hand turn. A left-hand turn onto a one-way highway may be made on a red light after stopping and yielding to other traffic.

Thus, at stop signs, the Idaho bicyclist may slow, yield, and roll. At red lights when intending to turn right they can slow, yield and roll, but they must stop, yield, and then roll to make a left turn or to proceed straight through the intersection.

## **The Idaho Experience**

Idaho's experience with its innovative approach has been positive according to Mark McNeese, Bicycle/Pedestrian Coordinator for the Idaho Transportation Department. McNeese says the Idaho law recognizes the reality that most bicyclists fail to come to a complete stop at stop signs. It is fairly easy to yield the right-of-way, if needed, without actually stopping. McNeese argues that collisions occur in stop sign controlled intersections because vehicle operators, including bicyclists, make a mistake deciding when it is safe to go, not due to confusion about whether to stop or yield. He adds that Idaho bicycle-collision statistics confirm that the Idaho law has resulted in no discernable increase in injuries or fatalities to bicyclists. McNeese says that bicyclists, due to their vulnerability, will seldom "push their luck" and refuse to yield to vehicles when necessary. Those who do take such chances would probably do so with or without the yield law.

McNeese reports that the Idaho system has additional benefits. The state does not need to increase the cost of signalized intersections with special sensing equipment because the stop, yield and roll system enables bicyclists to roll when the intersection is clear. In Oregon, under present law, many traffic-control vehicle detection systems fail to pick up the presence of a bicyclist, resulting in a light that is never triggered into a green cycle during low-volume vehicular use.

Under the Idaho system, less expensive intersection sensors can be used because equipment need not be so sensitive as to pick up the small amount of metal in many modern bicycle wheels and frames. Idaho has even gone for far as to expand their law in 2006 to allow motorcycles to stop, yield and roll on red lights if the traffic control signal fails to activate a green light (Idaho Code, 49-720).

McNeese also reports that conflicts between neighborhood traffic-calming advocates and bicycle commuters has also been reduced. He says that many neighborhoods alongside arterial roadways attempt to limit traffic cutting through their neighborhoods by requesting installation of stop signs. Since bicycle commuters and youngsters tend to favor these same low traffic-volume side streets, the flow of non-motorized commuter traffic is made smoother because bicyclists can slow, yield and roll at stop signs. He says this cuts down on bicycle commuter time (and effort) while also reducing the flow of motorized traffic on quiet neighborhood side streets.

McNeese says that in 1988, Idaho removed the education requirement from the 1982 law because special training was unnecessary. Youthful riders quickly adapted to the new system and had more respect for a law that legalized actual riding behavior.