HOME SAFELY PODCAST

Q&A with Dr. Nathan Belz

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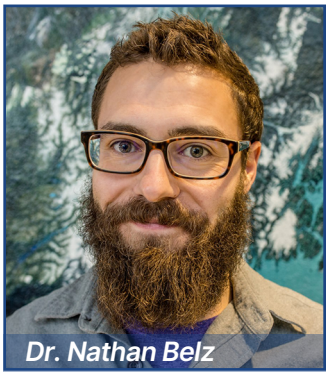
Dr. Nathan Belz

Q: What makes Alaska's rural transportation system so diverse?

A: I think in order to appreciate the diversity of modes that we have, you first have to just appreciate the scale and the vastness of the state of Alaska. We have very large distances and large distances between our population centers. About 64% of our communities aren't reasonably accessible by road, and if you exclude primitive trail systems, that number is closer to 80%. So, how do you get to those communities if you can't drive there? You would go by air or you would go by boat. Passenger cars and pickup trucks are the exception. It is more likely to find ATVs, side-by-sides, four-wheelers, and snow machines in some of those smaller communities.

Q: What are some of the unique transportation safety challenges Alaska faces?

A: We really have to think about safety solutions that are simple, affordable, and easy to maintain. The transportation risks that we face in these rural and remote areas are very different than others. These routes can vary greatly by season, and the distance required to travel between communities can be very high cost and high risk. The nature of travel also tends to be more multimodal and nontraditional, with people using boats, ATVs, snow machines, and other utility vehicles. We also have issues related to lack of data or difficulty managing and maintaining safety data systems. Incomplete and non-reporting of data in rural communities really hinders our ability to develop informed, data-driven plans and mitigation strategies.

Q: What are some of the unusual transportation modes and safety challenges in Alaska?

A: Our aviation system is huge. We have over 390 public-use airports and literally thousands of other registered and private landing strips across the state. Weather is a huge problem, and weather can change rapidly. We also have winter trails that are long, minimally maintained, often poorly marked, and subject to rapidly changing weather. Then we have ice roads, where rivers freeze solid and become corridors for travel and moving large amounts of goods. Obviously, that presents safety concerns, such as falling through the ice. And lastly, we have board roads. We have several communities where that is their transportation network because permafrost makes conventional roads difficult to build.

Q: How are different stakeholders working together to improve transportation safety?

A: I think more so than at any point in time in the state, the sheer number of people who now are interested in moving safety forward is significant. Anyone from state agencies, regional and local government organizations, nonprofit advocacy and professional organizations to tribes, nations, community organizations, and federal partners are involved. A lot of people are sitting at the table identifying where we're at and where we want to be. I think there's a lot of reason to be optimistic about that, because now there are a lot of people talking together rather than working on problems in silos, and that wasn't happening 15 years ago.

Q: What progress gives you hope for the future of transportation safety in Alaska?

A: I think there are a lot of things to highlight. Rural communities now have mechanisms and systems so they can track the data themselves. We're also seeing work on dust management and mitigation, improved cellular connectivity and the elimination of dead spots, improved trail marking and shelters, and better opportunities for residents to share what transportation challenges they're having. I think a lot of our residents are now asking for what they need rather than complaining about what they don't have. The themes we've heard include safer school zones, connectivity to the road system, access for youth to explore more of their world, and dependable bridges and infrastructure.

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