

Testimony for SB385 – Legalization of Lane Splitting in Oregon

By Robert Glover

I learned to ride motorcycles back in January of 2010, after moving to Southern California for a contract position. I quickly discovered that my eight-mile commute was taking forty-five minutes each direction, regardless of the time of day. This was from Torrance to El Segundo and back, for those familiar with the area.

I decided to buy a motorcycle specifically because of lane splitting. After completing the MSF course (similar to the Team Oregon course here) and getting my endorsement, I spent a week practicing riding around my local area, and then the following week, started commuting work... and splitting lanes.

Doing this, my daily commute dropped to fifteen minutes each way. No longer was I stuck in stop and go traffic anywhere. On the I-405, I could safely slip between cars as traffic slowed to a crawl, and on surface streets, I could filter to the front of the line. Since motorcycles by their very nature accelerate faster than cars, it made perfect sense.

One of the excuses against allowing it in (insert city or state here) is, "our traffic isn't as bad as California." Baloney, I say. In my opinion, every single state in the country could benefit from allowing it. It's something that has been done in Europe for decades. And, try sitting on a motorcycle in stop and go traffic during a hot Summer day in Oregon and you'll wish you could keep moving too.

By allowing motorcycles to split lanes, congestion is reduced. No longer is a car sitting behind a motorcycle. Instead, that motorcycle is on its own, in its own space. No longer is a motorcyclist worried about being rear-ended by a car – something that would either kill or at the very least, severely injure the motorcyclist.

Furthermore, something I observed in California is that because of lane splitting, car drivers actually pay more attention! They actually use their side mirrors, because that's how they see a motorcycle approaching.

Sure, every motorist will get surprised the first couple of times they counter a motorcycle splitting past them. It's happened to me, years before I learned to ride, when I lived in the San Francisco Bay Area. But it doesn't take long before you get used to it. And, as a rider, when I'm in my car, I watch out for motorcycles even more, and make a point to give them space to get past me.

So, the reasons to allow it are as follows:

Safety

No more rear-end collisions in stopped traffic. Rider can keep moving on hot days (or in bad weather). Motorcycle motors won't overheat (for air-cooled motorcycles, such as most Harleys and many smaller motorcycles).

Congestion Reduction

Reduced congestion by effectively eliminating motorcycles from the equation. Anybody else who decides to ride, and to split lanes, helps even further

Pollution Reduction

Motorcycles already get vastly better gas mileage than cars, and more people riding means less fuel being burned, and therefore less pollution. There are already two electric motorcycle manufacturers in the USA, and they're ideal for commuting

Convenience

Those who choose to ride and split lanes can save a lot of time getting anywhere. We're the ones not focused on our phones or other attention-stealing activities and instead focus on the ride.

CHP Support

In California, the California Highway Patrol supports and embraces lane splitting. They will be the first ones to come down on a rider who is doing it in an unsafe manner, but they are very supportive of it when done properly. There have been a number of times over the years when bills have been submitted to ban the practice, and every time, the CHP has been successful in getting the bill killed. They were also supportive of finally "legalizing" it, whereas it had been an unwritten rule before.

Weather

Oregon has hot Summers. Motorcycles do not have air conditioning, or even fans. For riders to stay cool, we have to keep moving. Furthermore, many motorcycles still use air-cooled motors. Harleys and many BMWs are great examples. They have to keep moving to keep from overheating. A 90-deg day is still very pleasant on a motorcycle, as long as you're moving. But in stop and go traffic, it can get tiring, and even cause heat stroke.

There's a well-done video on YouTube that discusses many of these advantages of lane splitting. It's only fifteen minutes in length; I encourage everybody to watch it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JNGD9AAIfU>

Now, please be aware that there are a lot of other lane splitting videos on YouTube. Some are good, many are bad. Many focus on stupid people doing stupid things, such as going WAY too fast and being downright dangerous.

The Right Way

The general rule of thumb for lane splitting, as defined by the California Highway Patrol, is to never exceed 15 mph more than the speed of traffic you are splitting past, and never exceed the posted speed limit when doing so. When on the freeway, always split between Lanes 1 and 2 (the leftmost lane and the one to its right). In town, any lane is fair game when filtering to the front of a traffic light.

It's also the rider's responsibility to ensure that they do not hit any vehicles while attempting to split. Simply put, if there isn't room, don't do it. If you damage somebody's car, or their mirror, you should take responsibility for it.

You also should never attempt to split lanes next to semi-trucks, RVs or other large vehicles. Likewise, never split past a vehicle when there is an open lane next to them, because more than likely, they will move into that lane. So much of it is common sense, and it doesn't take long at all to figure out.

It's also worth noting that there are times when drivers will attack riders who attempt to split lanes past them; e.g. force them out of the lane, or whatever. Some people talk about people opening their doors on people splitting. Sure, it's happened, but it's extremely rare. And both instances that I've heard of resulted in the driver going to jail.

A website was setup by a rider in California to help get the information out to the public. This is an excellent site and I strongly recommend visiting it.

<http://lanesplittingislegal.com>

Arguments Against

There are plenty of arguments against lane splitting. Most of them are based purely in emotion and do not support facts.

1. "It's not safe." There have been several studies done and it has been proven that lane splitting is in fact safer than not splitting.
2. "It's not fair that he can pass me!" To this I tell people to get a bike and come ride with us, and they can do it too. That tends to shut them up because they then go into the, "motorcycles aren't safe," diatribe.
3. "I'm entitled to my lane." Yes, this is how the law is currently written, and it should change. There is so much wasted space on the roads that motorcycles could occupy for short periods of time that it would make life easier for everybody.
4. "They go too fast." This is clearly a violation of the law, and it will be up to the police to handle it. But this happens far less than you'd think.

A couple of years ago, we almost had lane splitting legislation passed here in Oregon. It passed the senate, and had passed committee to go to the House for a vote, and it was looking like it might pass. Then the Governor's Council on Motorcycle Safety had it killed before it ever got a formal vote. To this date, nobody on that council has answered any of my calls or emails as to why they had it killed. I'm sure I know why – they don't consider it "safe" but lack actual facts. I hope there will be a way to avoid having this happen again with this legislation.

In Conclusion

Riding a motorcycle is dangerous. That's a simple fact. But as we're taught in the riding classes, it's all about managing risk. By allowing us to split lanes, we actually are able to manage our risk much better than before. No more fears about being rear-ended, and in the cases where a motorist tries to intimidate us (it's happened to me more than once), we can escape between cars without fear of a ticket.

Thank you for your attention on this matter!

Robert Glover