Speed – driving too fast for conditions – remains the number one contributor to fatal motor vehicle crashes in BC. Each fall, the number of people killed or injured in a crash as a result of driving too fast for conditions spikes upwards – nearly doubling.

What is a safe speed? It is not simply the greatest speed at which you can “keep ‘er on the road”. Safe speed includes obligations to drive at a speed that does not generate undue risks, and to apply behaviours that provide a margin of error – for you and other drivers. Determining the speed that’s right for conditions is a mental calculation involving three dynamic variables: the vehicle, the driving environment, and the driver.

**The Vehicle**

It only takes a few minutes to conduct regular vehicle inspections and there’s plenty of good information available to help you inspect, maintain and prepare your vehicle. A well maintained vehicle will perform as you expect, which is especially important in an emergency situation.

Whether you’re hauling a load of logs, driving the service truck or a 4x4, a load impacts vehicle handling dynamics. A heavy load increases stopping distance. Extra weight changes the centre of gravity and generates momentum that tends to carry the vehicle straight ahead. An unbalanced load decreases vehicle stability and impairs the vehicle’s response to driver inputs. Reduce your speed to adapt to these changes in vehicle handling.

**The Driving Environment**

Driving decisions must accurately consider the physical environment. Drivers have to think about the road (e.g. surface materials, lane width, sighting distance, grade, etc.) and the weather. More importantly, your calculations have to account for how these factors influence visibility, traction and vehicle performance.
Equally critical components of the driving environment are other vehicles, drivers, and surprises. “Driving for conditions” includes understanding the risk that a pedestrian, plough truck or moose may suddenly appear in front of you. Your driving behaviours must acknowledge the presence of other traffic, and allow for the possibility that the vehicle ahead might not have proper winter tires, or might not be operated by a skilled winter driver.

To make quality decisions, drivers must actively scan their entire driving environment to collect necessary information. Look as far ahead as you can see, then watch the road surface in front of you. Check your mirrors. Watch the ditches. Glance at the gauges. Select and use relevant information. The patch of black ice, the curve ahead, the pedestrian crossing and the oncoming bus all matter. The lovely sunset, the sale at Wal-Mart, your hair-do and your cell phone don’t.

Applying that information effectively requires drivers to be constantly assessing the driving environment. Experienced drivers understand that “shine” on the corner means “very slick”. All drivers, especially inexperienced drivers, need to recognize they might make mistakes, or that their calculations might be “off” – and slow down a little.

The Driver

The third element – the part that ties it all together – is the driver. Many factors influence a driver’s capacity to make prompt, correct decisions, and their ability to execute quick, effective responses. Consider the points below. Conduct an honest self-assessment. How often, and to what extent do you allow these factors to influence your driving behaviours?

Factors that support correct decisions and quick reaction times:

- Driving experience
- Well-rested and alert
- Patience
- Expectation / anticipation
- Proper hydration and diet
- Physical / mental fitness
Factors that contribute to poor decisions and slower reaction times:

- Over-confidence / complacency
- Fatigue or other impairment
- Aggressive attitude
- Cognitive load – “things on your mind”
- Declining vision, reduced visibility

The speed that is right for you recognizes your state of mind, your skills and your limitations.

Driving is a complex activity. Yet, driving for conditions can be boiled down to being prepared with a road-worthy vehicle, looking for and paying attention to important cues in your entire driving environment, choosing a speed that’s right for those conditions, and watching out for the other guy.

“I’m just giving you a hard time, Rob. You’re doing just fine, young fella. We have to tighten up after the junction, so I’ll slip by you there. Once we’re on the blacktop switch over to 44, and I’ll let you know if I see any big surprises.”

“Thanks for your patience, Keith. I’m having a pretty good first winter, and I aim to keep it that way.”

Resources:

BC Forest Safety’s Transportation Webpage – keep up to date on the latest safety developments.
http://www.bcforestsafe.org/forestry_trucksafe.html

DriveBC – check road and weather conditions before you plan your journey
http://www.drivebc.ca/

Shift Into Winter – learn how to prepare the driver and the vehicle for winter conditions
http://shiftintowinter.ca/prepare-yourself/

Road Safety At Work – vehicle inspection and maintenance tips
http://www.roadsafetyatwork.ca/