



**Announcer**

It's time for the *IHSA Safety Podcast*.

**Enzo Garritano:**

Welcome to the *IHSA Safety Podcast*. I'm Enzo Garritano, President and CEO of IHSA. In this episode on road safety in Northern Ontario, we're joined by host Ken Rayner, IHSA's Vice President of Customer and Labour Relations, Market Development, and Communications, and as guest, Michelle Roberts, IHSA's own Director of Stakeholder and Client Engagement.

**Ken Rayner:**

Thanks, Enzo. Michelle Roberts, welcome back to the *IHSA Safety Podcast* once again. I look forward to continuing our conversation on road safety, and today we're going to discuss some of those unique challenges that exist while driving in Northern Ontario.

**Michelle Roberts:**

Great. Well, thank you, Ken. It's nice to be back. I'm hoping we can take some time today to chat and raise some awareness to our listeners that we should be all factoring in and considering when we're driving in Northern Ontario. Unfortunately, there is some increased risk associated with both large commercial vehicles, or trucks as we call them, and the passengers' vehicles when we're traveling in the north.

So hopefully our time today, we can chat and share some information and tips, with the intent of promoting safe driving so we can reduce motor vehicle incidents, or MVIs we often refer them to. And so I think our chat will resonate both if you are a commercial driver yourself and you're operating a heavy piece of equipment or a large vehicle, or for those of us who are in passenger vehicles and maybe we're heading up north for a road trip this summer to explore the beautiful Northern Ontario. So the goal is hopefully those tips will be applicable and benefit all road users.

**Ken Rayner:**

You know what? I think there's going to be more Ontarians that are going to be exploring Ontario this year. We've got an Ontario staycation tax credit for 2022, so the government is certainly encouraging families to explore the province. So I would think that more people are going to be looking to spend some of their summer holidays exploring Ontario.

But maybe we need to start first by defining what we mean by Northern Ontario. So for someone like myself, who doesn't spend a lot of time in Northern Ontario, I may think that Northern Ontario is everything north of Highway 7. That would probably be incorrect. Would it be, Michelle?

**Michelle Roberts:**

Well, it's true. A lot of people do think you hit the north when you hit that boundary of Highway 7. But really what we're trying to focus on is some of the unique challenges that exist in the true north, we'll call that, and primarily concentrating around the two highways in the north, Highway 11 and Highway 17.

So just to put it into context and people to visualize, when we talk about Highway 11, that's typically starting at Barrie and heading north. And you can see a change in the highway between four-lane, typical urban freeway-style highway. And then the farther north we get, that changes into more two-lane and rural areas. And it can range from traveling in the bigger city, like in Barrie, to then getting into farmland, and to totally uninhabited wilderness areas. Highway 11 takes us north and typically can cross over things like Barrie, Orillia, all the way to Huntsville, North Bay, Hearst, up to Thunder Bay, Fort Frances and Rainy River. So that's a vast highway, Highway 11.

And then Highway 17 is a really important, vital part of the national highway in Canada, because it is the sole highway that connects us from the eastern province right through to the western province of Canada. And it also has a lot of small roads that connect within Ontario to the Manitoba border. But it's crucial in that cross transit commercial vehicle as well as if anybody wants to travel from province to province.

So it can go from Toronto to Montreal, but obviously connects the other provinces, getting us to the East Coast as well. So when I say Northern Ontario in this chat, we're thinking Highway 11 and Highway 17 is the major parts that we're concentrating on.

**Ken Rayner:**

These are still highways that are maintained by the Ministry of Transportation in Ontario. So roads are roads, highways are highways, are they not? Why are we specifically talking about driving in Northern Ontario?

**Michelle Roberts:**

Yeah, it's a great point, because our safety partners, like the OPP [Ontario Provincial Police] and the Ministry of Transportation, like the MTO, collectively, we want to raise awareness and acknowledge the vast importance of the Northern Ontario. As we mentioned, it's a vital link for us getting east and west. But it's really important in our commercial and the movement of goods.

So some of the particular facts, kind of some interesting things that maybe the listeners don't know about in Northern Ontario that I'd love to share, and these have been provided through the MTO: that approximately 8,400 trucks travel in the northern provincial highways on a daily basis. That's a lot of vehicles moving goods and services for us. And again, majority of those 8,400 trucks are utilizing Highway 11 and Highway 17. And it's estimated that over \$200 million of cargo travels through Northern Ontario. And the estimation is by the year 2041, that probably the vast majority or the volume of the traffic in Northern Ontario highways is going to be commercial vehicles.

So as we talk about the importance of Highway 11 and 17 and getting goods moving, we know that the volume of traffic with commercial vehicles is going to increase, and there is unique driving conditions we

need to factor in when we're in Northern Ontario. And we're going to expand on those a little bit more, I know, because there's unique factors when it comes to road closures or weather conditions and delays, but really one of the key things here is knowing that the volume is increasing.

We all have our part to play when it comes to sharing the road. And so if an incident occurs, we really need to factor in the impact that has on the movement of goods in the province, the personal travel that we want, and then the residents that live around Northern Ontario. And hopefully, with some of our tips we can share, we can prevent a collision from happening and increase our ability to share the road safely.

**Ken Rayner:**

So we've established where we're focusing on and some facts about the importance of the Northern Ontario highways, so both Highway 11 and Highway 17, to Ontario's overall economy and the movement of goods and services. So maybe now let's talk about driving in Northern Ontario and how it's different than driving in southern Ontario. Maybe I could throw in my own fun fact here, Michelle.

In preparation for this podcast, I was really amazed to learn and appreciated how vast our province is when I took a look and found that the distance of driving from Toronto to Kenora, Ontario is about the same distance as driving from Toronto to Jacksonville, Florida. Just amazing how vast Ontario is. So let's talk about that difference between driving in Northern Ontario than southern Ontario.

**Michelle Roberts:**

Yeah, as you mentioned, distance is a big factor there. But the conditions when you're driving in southern Ontario are very different. So for example, in southern Ontario we have multi-lane highways, so vast interconnection of multiple lanes and highways. Most of those have clear line of sight where there's not any big obstruction, so you can see far ahead and what's coming up. Speeds are way higher. Well, I shouldn't say way higher, but they are higher in southern Ontario. Typically, on the highways you're traveling 100 and some sections we can do up to 110 kilometres an hour. Majority of the highways in southern Ontario have that dividing barrier between the traffic moving in both directions, and typically have paved shoulders or somewhere we can pull off to if we need to. And usually in southern Ontario there's so much access to food and rest stops and gas stations and all those things we take for granted.

But when you head north, and the further north you go, those road conditions and highways change. So as we mentioned, Highway 11 and 17, they go for kilometres and kilometres and hundreds of kilometres. You could be traveling on those highways and it could take 160 km more between rest stops or gas stations for you to get access. Many of those highways are reduced to two lanes, not the multi-four lanes. Often there's limited barriers or separation between the traffic going in both directions, and there is infrequent access to food or rest stops or gas stations.

So that's different. And so when we think about planning and how do we drive safely, those conditions and the infrastructure of the highways themselves are very, very different. And then on top of that, in Northern Ontario, which is awesome to see because it makes Northern Ontario very picturesque, but wildlife is an additional hazard that we don't necessarily see on the major highways in the south. And the wildlife can vary. In the north, you could have big animals like elk and moose and deer. And

obviously if we have exposure with wildlife on a highway when you've got speed, that can cause havoc, collisions, both for passenger vehicles and commercial vehicles.

And the other important thing to notice the difference between the south and Northern Ontario is in Southern Ontario, if something happens, there's an incident, an event, a closure, typically, we've got round-the-clock access to emergency services and cleanup crews and everything else that's needed to keep the highways open. But in Northern Ontario that's very restricted and they don't have 24-hour access. So if something does occur in the north, response time, cleanup time and access is limited, and that's a factor we need to consider in the differences between the north and the south.

**Ken Rayner:**

One other thing I think, for those of us that live in Southern Ontario and like to play the game, "Oh, my gaslight's on. Let's see how much farther I can go," I take it if you play that game in Northern Ontario, you may not have the outcome that you really want because you may be on the side of the road, searching for more gas.

So let's talk about the last point you mentioned, Michelle. You were talking about unplanned highway closures in Northern Ontario. What's causing or contributing to that?

**Michelle Roberts:**

This is something that the road safety partners like MTO and OPP are definitely trying to raise awareness on. Unplanned highway closures, they can occur because a significant event happened, like a collision or a motor vehicle incident, but also can occur because of extreme weather and changing conditions. And when the roads are closed in Northern Ontario so you think of those two major arteries we talked about, Highway 11 and 17—there's a section of that closed, there's very limited alternatives.

And so it impacts, like we said at the beginning, all of the trucks and the goods that are moving; that could come to a halt. But some of those road closures can be as a result of severe weather. And I think this season, in the winter, we've definitely experienced some ups and downs of weather. Well, if we experience that in southern Ontario, magnify that in Northern Ontario.

And with severe weather, it can reduce our visibility. The geographic and the landscape in the north is very different, that if we've got blowing snow and whiteouts, it could be for periods and sections of the road in the north, and it would be extreme caution, and they may close that section of the highway. Collisions are another reason for road closure. That's what ultimately we want to prevent: collisions, because we know what comes with that is not only the likelihood of property damage but potential injury, and it creates a whole whack of need of cleanup and emergency services.

So if there's a collision, as we talked about, those highways may only be two lanes in both directions, and they might have to close both sections of the highway in both directions to get proper emergency care and clean up. And then blocked roadways. We're hearing more of maybe travelers who aren't familiar with the road systems in the north and maybe taking some improper or illegal, maybe, lane changes, or trying to switch directions to get off a different route. And that can cause a lot of chaos on the roads.

So if someone's doing an improper change and then ends up blocking the roadway, that's another reason why a collision... or the road could be closed itself. And as we noted, if there's any type of closure, not only does it affect the movement of goods with the commercial vehicles, it can definitely impact us if we want to travel and have some fun in the north and sightseeing.

But we also have to factor in all the people that live in the north and all the residents, and these are their major routes for commuting to work. Maybe they have to come down to Southern Ontario for medical appointments, whatever their reasons are for using the road, we've just also impacted all of the residents in the north when something unfortunate happens. It's also different if an incident occurs in Southern Ontario, you often see what we call the EDRs, which is the emergency detour routes. And they're designated routes where you could pull off the highway. And they've got access through on and off ramps, and commercial vehicles can travel on certain roads to then jump back on the highway, maybe three or four exchanges up.

But that's very limited. Those opportunities in the infrastructure aren't like that in the north. So if emergency road closure occurs, then typically the reality is the road's closed, traffic's not moving, there is no alternative routes, and you may need to be parked up and wait it out. If we can avoid any closures, that's definitely what we want to do.

**Ken Rayner:**

So if I'm traveling between Sault Ste. Marie and Thunder Bay and there's a road closure, I may not be able to just turn on the radio and listen to a news report from the local news helicopter telling me all the different routes I can take. I may not even get any radio reception, depending on where I am. It is a very different part of the province compared to what we experience for those of us that live in southern Ontario and drive in southern Ontario all the time. So what are some safety tips that you'd like to share regarding the rules when highways are closed in Northern Ontario?

**Michelle Roberts:**

I think first tip is making sure that we're respecting the road closures. And if an incident occurs, it's the police who have the authority to close the highways. And they follow under the *Highway Traffic Act*. And they work directly with the MTO's northern regional offices to update and communicate and respond. So let's respect the notices that we get from the OPP and the MTO to make sure that we're abiding by those closures. They are responsible for determining when it is safe to return and open up the roads. So ultimately, they have to factor in a lot of conditions and scenarios: if it was a collision, emergency response to clean up. Is the road safe? Has there been any damage on the roads? And unfortunately, there's not a magic wand that they can wave and say, "This collision occurred. In two hours, we're going to be cleaned up."

So we have to practice patience, understanding and respect when an incident does occur, and certainly abide by the rules. So maybe if you're a passenger vehicle, there's a road closure up ahead, maybe you're getting frustrated and you want to detour off, or, "Hey, I'll just slip on this closed road and take a little patch of it." There's fines associated with that. So also be aware of if you take the... Well, one, we don't want you to take the chance of using a road close, but if you were to do that, you're subject to a fine. It's a minimum \$110 fine and three demerit points. So those are some safety rules you need to follow if you get to a section of the road that is deemed closed.

**Ken Rayner:**

Okay. So we mentioned before, Ontario has introduced a staycation tax credit for 2022, so we may have more families that want to head up Highway 11, Highway 17, go to some of our beautiful Ontario provincial parks, visit Killbear or Arrowhead. What are some things some of our listeners can do if they're planning a trip this spring, summer or fall to the north, to help them make their drive not only safe, but how do they make it more enjoyable? Because it's beautiful, it really is. I mean, I'm joking about not driving north of Highway 7, but I have had the opportunity to drive between here and Kenora and the landscape is just breathtaking.

**Michelle Roberts:**

Yeah. It's definitely a beautiful part of Ontario and a beautiful part of Canada. The one tip that I would suggest to anybody who's going to be planning a road trip—and whether you're a professional driver and you're heading to the north, like you and I, Ken. Maybe we're going to plan a vacation and head north—is please visit and check out the Ontario 511 app. It's a free app you can put on your mobile device and it's designed to help all road users in the province of Ontario, but you can filter all through for Northern Ontario. And it helps to determine key events and things that are happening on the road. So it's a great way to plan for a safe trip. It's a great way to stay in the know, that if the conditions ahead of where your destination is are changing, you can get notifications and alerts.

So the 511 app right now has some really good features on it. Would notify road users of incidents or closures, so maybe you need to take a different route or change your plans. In the winter, it has the Track My Plow feature, which is great to know if the conditions are clear ahead. It also factors in forecasted weather and road conditions. So what would the roads look like if we're getting a ton of snow? And can alert you to changing weather that might be happening on your route ahead.

And you can also set up personal notifications with the 511 app. There's some really great features. And it also has a trucker mode. The trucker mode is for the commercial vehicle driver and it has different features that you can personalize as well. But that's important, because if you're traveling in Northern Ontario as a commercial vehicle operator, there's a lot of vast highway that you have to cover and there's not a lot of truck-appropriate rest stops.

You think of the large configuration of the vehicles, they need extra space. So the trucker mode actually maps out, in Northern Ontario, where the trucker-friendly rest stops are. And they're continuing to add features for the truckers. It also indicates truck inspection stations. Where are they? And we have to do our safety notice here. They're not to be avoided. That's not why you're using the feature. But oftentimes that might be where somewhere you need to step off the highway, drive off, go through the inspection if it's open, but also is a great safe spot to park and hopefully access your vehicle and do a walk around and make sure everything's good.

The 511 app also gives notification on which roads have seasonal load restrictions, and we're getting into that right now with this spring season and the change in the thaw, that many roads can be closed and/or limited to commercial vehicle access. And then, as we've talked about, if an incident does occur, there's a collision, a road closure, the 511 app is the format that the MTO and the OPP use to alert road users that this section of the highway is closed; anticipated, maybe reopening timelines.

So it's a great way to stay informed and plan appropriately, and we know that that's one of the key features in making sure we have safe trips when we're utilizing it. So I encourage everyone to check out the Ontario 511 app.

**Ken Rayner:**

So that includes me. I've heard of it before. I hadn't downloaded it on my phone. Michelle, I'm going to do that right after we get done recording this podcast. You've joined us so many times in talking about safe driving practices. What about some of those safe driving practices that you'd recommend for those that are going to be heading up to Northern Ontario?

**Michelle Roberts:**

Yes. Well, and we've covered off many of the differences, so please put that in mind when you're thinking of the road conditions: being prepared. So a great way to be prepared is, as we said, start with trip planning. Use that 511 app to help you identify not only the safest route to get there or quickest route, to avoid any type of road closures, but certainly plan ahead to think, "Okay. Where am I going? What's my distance?" You mentioned earlier running your vehicle on the gas light. There could be long stretches of hundreds of kilometers without access to a gas station. So plan ahead to know, "Okay, well this is how many kilometers we're traveling. Where can I gas up along the way?"

Also, rest is important. If you're doing a long road trip to the Northern Ontario, we definitely want you to stop and take breaks. Enjoy the scenery, most importantly, pull off safely in a safe area to do so, and take a break so that you're rested for safe driving. And be prepared that road conditions can change. I live in the Kawarthas and I've gone up to visit some staff up in Sudbury area, and in that four-hour stretch, I could hit every season, of sunshine, to snow, to hail, to sleet, to rain, all in that four-hour stretch, and it just changes dramatically.

So be prepared for that because with those seasonal changes in weather and road, it impacts our driving and the driving conditions, so that's important. We're still in the winter season, and the north always has an extended winter season, and there's a lot of differences in the winter maintenance schedules that happen in Northern Ontario. In southern Ontario, we're very privileged, I think, to have snowplows that are out, and all the major routes are being cleaned and sanded and salted. In the north the winter maintenance standards are very different—you got to think of the 1,000 kilometres that they have to clear—is that they have a system that based on the volume of the traffic in the north is the priority roads they're going to clear first, right?

So knowing that could mean that lesser-traveled roads that maybe you're taking to get to your destination may not be cleared yet, and may take some time, up to 24 hours, before that they are cleared. So that's something to factor in when you're thinking if you're going to drive in the north. The other thing is there's different speeds in Northern Ontario. We mentioned if you're on the highways, it's typically reduced in the north to 90 kilometres. And if you're sharing the road with large commercial vehicles, which is very common, as we said, in the north, commercial vehicles are governed at a speed. They have a speed limiter of 105.

So that means that truck, although you might be getting frustrated because that truck isn't going too fast, in your mind, is they're governed. They physically can't push that truck beyond 105 kilometres. So

being aware of not only the posted speed limit, that it's less than in southern Ontario, but also trucks are governed. And there could be a lot of different vehicle configurations in the north. Think of the logging trucks. That's not so commonly seen in the highways in southern Ontario. It's very common in the north. And they could have different configurations, wider loads, which create some blind spots, not only for the commercial driver but for us if you're driving around the vehicle as well. So be prepared. Know that the lane and the flow, it's two lanes, so you're going to be faced to opposing traffic. And making sure that you're sharing the road responsibly in general. And then making sure, as I said, long trips, you need to make sure you stay alert and you stay focused. So take those breaks, avoid distractions.

The OPP just published a news alert yesterday talking about the road stats from 2021, and aggressive driving is up, and it's increasing MVIs, motor vehicle incidents, and preventable collisions. So avoid aggressive driving, avoid speeding, make sure that you're using your car features appropriately, and your seatbelt, turning off your cell phone. And one thing I wanted to mention, too, is utilizing the 511 app sounds great, but we also know there's stretches in the north that don't have the best cell phone reception. So with the 511 app, if you pre-plan that before you leave, you can download your route and look at that. Similar to pulling out your old paper map and going, "Okay, where are we going to stop along the way?"

Do that before you leave, while you have Wi-Fi connection. That way if you hit spots in the north where the cell phone reception drops, it will connect again when you're back in, but you've got the bulk of your route planning already done. As we get into the spring season, I just want to remind everyone that we're going to be back into construction season and we're going to have those vulnerable road users on the side of the road. So please be cautious about entering construction zones: reducing your speed, avoiding distractions, and keeping all those that work on or near the roads safe as well.

**Ken Rayner:**

So Michelle, both professionally and personally, I want to thank you. Professionally, for giving all these resources and great tips for all of our commercial drivers and the membership that we support. But also for people like myself who's planning on driving in Northern Ontario this year with our family. We've got campsites booked at provincial parks and campgrounds. So we're going to be driving in the north, and I really appreciate everything you shared. Giving me some great tips on how I can keep my family safe, but also make sure it's an enjoyable experience. Because we're taking vacation and we want to make sure that when we go, the whole vacation is a good time.

So you've shared a whole host of things. What about anything on the IHSA website that if people are interested in learning more, maybe they can search there? Any recommendations?

**Michelle Roberts:**

Definitely. What we've tried to do with all of our road safety solutions is package them so they're a little easier to find. So if you visit [ihsa.ca/roadsafety](https://ihsa.ca/roadsafety), you'll get to the landing page where we've hosted all of our road safety solutions. And that varies: everything from policies, procedures, safety talks. We have free e-learning. We talked about distracted driving, there's a free e-learning course on there. And also we have one of our toolkits that's packaged is actually titled *Sharing the Road*. And that's where I would encourage our listeners to go to this episode of the podcast.

We're also creating a webinar that features some of our resources specifically to help those who are going to be traveling in the north. That will be posted on the section of *Sharing the Road*. A lot of those resources are free to access. They're just on the website, so anybody, whether, you said yourself, as workers and our membership, but family members, if you want to share those and encourage others to check them out. So visit [ihsa.ca/roadsafety](http://ihsa.ca/roadsafety). And just remember that whether you're driving for work, using the roads both professionally or personally, we all have a part to play in sharing the roads responsibly and keeping all of us in Ontario safe.

**Ken Rayner:**

Michelle, you are a phenomenal advocate for road safety. Thank you so much. Thank you for sharing all this information and for talking to us about road safety in Northern Ontario. Thanks again.

**Michelle Roberts:**

Thank you.

**Enzo Garritano:**

Thank you for listening to IHSA's podcast on road safety in Northern Ontario. Be sure to subscribe and like us on your podcast channel, and visit us on [IHSA.ca](http://IHSA.ca) for a wealth of health and safety resources and information. Have a great summer and drive safe.

**Announcer**

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