

## NEW LICENCE POINTS SYSTEM CHANGES ITALIAN DRIVING HABITS BY DOMINIC STANDISH

(ANSA) - Venice, 23 January - Some 7000 Italians die annually on the country's roads, twice as many as in Britain, which has a similar population size. But the new licence points system seems to be denting Italians' penchant for driving as if on they were on a Formula One racetrack.

In a poll by LeasePlan, a vehicle leasing company, 22 percent of European drivers thought Italians to be Europe's worst drivers.

However, the situation seems to be getting better. Deputy Transport Minister Mario Tassone noted recently that there were 19 percent fewer fatal accidents between July and December 2003 than the previous period.

Better driving was also attributed to the new licence points system in the joint 13th Report by ACI-Censis on 'The Consumer Advance,' released earlier this week.

Since July 2003, Italian drivers who violate highway codes have been penalised by a points system that can lead to losing a licence and repeating driving lessons.

Before, road users were generally fined for driving misdemeanours. Licences were only withdrawn for very serious offences, usually temporarily.

But things have changed: four out of ten Italians surveyed in the Report said that they have changed how they drive due to the points system.

The falling accident rate combined with the growing number of road users suggests Italians are driving more carefully.

There have been 1.2 million more cars in circulation over the last two years, according to the ACI-Censis Report. It states that there was a 13 percent increase in the number of Italians who are dependent on cars between 2002 and 2003. The greater number of cars has been a particular problem in regions with high population density. Italy is one of the most heavily populated countries in Europe. But there are especially high levels of population density in the Campania, Lombardy, Lazio, Liguria and Veneto regions.

Insufficient road improvements and building are additional problems for drivers. The Annual Italian Statistics Bulletin reported in December 2003 that Italy's 173,000 kilometres of roads have not kept up to speed with more vehicles.

Although it is safest to travel by public transport, more people have travelled by car and fewer on public transport over the last fifteen years. Urban public transport is used more by students (13.9 percent) than employees (7.2 percent), yet privately owned transport is the preferred means of travelling for both.

Dissatisfaction with public transport has added to car use, the report noted. The percentages of those satisfied by the quality of public services are lower than for any other form of transport, recorded the Annual Italian Statistics Bulletin.

While better roads and public transport would help make

driving in Italy safer, one of the best solutions is not to drive on a Saturday night. 891 of 1,885 accidents happened on Saturday nights in figures quoted by Parliamentary Affairs Minister Carlo Giovanardi.

The highest mortality rate is between four and five o'clock in the morning as people roll out of discos. So one of the best ways to drive safely on Italian roads is to avoid 'Saturday Night Road Fever.'