

Limits sought on vehicle electronics

John Crawley, Reuters

The Obama administration wants automakers to put limits on vehicle technologies that permit texting and cellphone calling when a car is moving, as part of a broader effort to stop driving behaviors that could be distracting and cause crashes.

Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood proposed voluntary steps on Thursday that would establish new safety criteria for hands-free calling, navigation, and entertainment systems that have become common in new cars and trucks.

The guidelines are mainly an attempt to reach younger drivers, who are the most inexperienced and whose daily lives are most influenced by wireless technology.

"Distracted driving is a dangerous and deadly habit on America's roadways -- that's why I've made it a priority to encourage people to stay focused behind the wheel," LaHood said.

Distracted driving deaths totaled 3,092 in 2010, the latest available figures show. But LaHood's agency believes the total could be higher due to the unwillingness of drivers to always admit behavior, lack of witnesses to a crash in some cases, or the death of the driver.

Most U.S. motorists surveyed last year acknowledged few situations in which they would not use a cellphone or text while behind the wheel. However, they supported measures to curb both practices, the Transportation Department said.

The guidelines announced on Thursday would cover standard and optional systems not directly relevant to safe driving or that cause "undue distraction" by engaging the driver's eyes or hands for more than a brief moment.

The proposal recommends disabling in-vehicle electronic devices that the driver could use when a car is moving. This would cover text messaging, Internet browsing, and access to social media.

The proposal is a compromise for LaHood, who stopped short of ordering that General Motors, Ford Motor, Chrysler and other manufacturers restrict hands-free and other dashboard advances popular with consumers and key selling points in new vehicles.

National Transportation Safety Board Chairman Deborah Hersman said in December that certain hands-free and other communications devices should be banned in cars.

The proposed guidelines are subject to a 60-day public comment period. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration will hold hearings in March in Los Angeles, Washington and Chicago.

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