LaHood calls summit on distracted driving

August 4 2009, By JOAN LOWY , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said Tuesday he will convene a summit of experts to figure out what to do about driver cell phone use and texting, practices that studies - and a growing number of accidents - show can be deadly.

LaHood said he intends to gather senior transportation officials, safety advocates, law enforcement representatives, members of Congress and academics who study distracted driving for the summit next month in Washington.

"The public is sick and tired of people being distracted and causing accidents," LaHood told a news conference. "We all know texting while driving is dangerous and we are going to do something about it so that responsible drivers don't have to worry about it when they or a loved one get on the road."

If it were up to him, he would ban texting while driving, LaHood said.

However, past safety initiatives like seat belts have shown that a simple ban often isn't enough to get drivers to change their habits unless it's accompanied by education and enforcement, he said.

LaHood said he expects the summit to produce several recommendations for specific actions to address the problem.

He pointed to several fatal incidents involving texting, including Alyssa Burns, a 17-year-old Eureka, Ill., high school student killed in June when

she drove off the road while sending a message to friends

The problem crosses over into other modes of transportation: A train crashed last year in California killing 25 people - including the train operator, who was texting at the time of the accident - and injuring 135.

In a study released last week, the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute found that when drivers of heavy trucks texted, their collision risk was 23 times greater than when not texting. Dialing a cell phone and using or reaching for an electronic device increased risk of collision about six times in cars and trucks.

The Virginia Tech researchers said the risks of texting generally applied to all drivers, not just truckers.

A separate report by Car and Driver magazine found that texting and driving is more dangerous than drunken driving.

The Governors Highway Safety Association, which represents state highway safety agencies, has said it does not doubt the dangers of texting and driving but does not support a ban because it would be difficult to enforce.

"There are a variety of challenges with distracted driving, and we commend the secretary for leading the effort to address this important highway safety issue," Barbara Harsha, the safety association's executive director, said in a statement.

The association "is particularly interested in strategies for enforcing texting and cell phone bans as well as technological applications that would limit or eliminate distractions," she said.

Texting has grown from nearly 10 billion messages a month in

December 2005 to more than 110 billion in December 2008, according to CTIA, the cellular phone industry's trade group.

Fourteen states and the District of Columbia have passed laws making texting while driving illegal. A group of Democratic members of Congress introduced legislation last week to impose a national ban on texting while driving.

On the Net:

http://www.dot.gov

http://www.ghsa.org/html/stateinfo/laws/cellphone(underscore)laws.html
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