

Administration takes aim at distracted driving

September 30 2009, By KEN THOMAS , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Driving while distracted is a growing peril in a nation reluctant to put down its cell phones and handheld devices even behind the wheel, the Obama administration declared on Wednesday. Officials said Congress and the public must team up to reduce the danger.

Opening a two-day meeting to find ways to reduce drivers' use of mobile devices, the Transportation Department reported that nearly 6,000 people were killed and a half-million were injured last year in vehicle crashes connected to driver distraction. That includes drivers talking on cell phones and texting.

"To put it plainly, distracted driving is a menace to society," Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said. "Distracted driving is an epidemic and it seems to be getting worse every year."

The meeting gathered experts to examine the potentially deadly mix of driving with cell phones, mobile devices, and other distractions that divert attention from the road. LaHood said he would offer recommendations on Thursday that could lead to new restrictions on the use of the devices behind the wheel.

While the meeting focused on drivers using cell phones and mobile devices, participants noted that distractions could include reaching into the back seat, applying makeup or eating.

"I have nightmares about the last moments of my mother's life," said

Greg Zaffke of Chicago, whose mother, Anita, was killed in May when a vehicle rear-ended her motorcycle at 50 mph. The driver had been painting her finger nails at the time of the crash.

Congress is watching the issue closely. Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., and other Democrats are pushing legislation that would require states to ban texting or e-mailing while operating a moving vehicle or lose 25 percent of their annual federal highway funding.

"We need every state to put safety first," Schumer told participants.

LaHood said the government would draw lessons from past efforts to reduce drunken driving and encourage motorists to wear seat belts, urging a "combination of strong laws, tough enforcement and ongoing public education."

The government reported that 5,870 people were killed and 515,000 were injured last year in crashes where at least one form of driver distraction was reported. Driver distraction was involved in 16 percent of all fatal crashes in 2008 and prevalent among many young drivers.

Eighteen states and the District of Columbia have passed laws making texting while driving illegal and seven states and the District have banned driving while talking on a hand-held cell phone, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. Many safety groups have urged a nationwide ban on texting and on using hand-held mobile devices while behind the wheel.

Researchers grappled with the question of whether using a hands-free device was safer than using a hand-held phone behind the wheel. One researcher cautioned that hands-free devices could still cause distractions if the driver needed to dial the phone or handle the device.

"I think it's important that we recognize that hands free is not risk free," said Dr. John Lee, a University of Wisconsin researcher.

Others said laws banning hand-held cell phone use by drivers would be easier to enforce and warned that total bans could preclude technologies such as General Motors' OnStar, an in-vehicle system that alerts emergency rescue officials to a crash.

"You have to be really careful about unintended consequences of just saying we need a complete, total cell phone ban," said Dr. Tom Dingus, director of the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute.

Family members of victims called for a complete ban by drivers and suggested technologies that prevent the mobile device from receiving e-mails or phone calls while the vehicle is in motion could address the problem.

"This isn't just a small problem. This is an epidemic," said Jennifer Smith of Grapevine, Texas. Her 61-year-old mother was killed last year in Oklahoma City by a young driver talking on a cell phone.

On the Net:

Distracted Driving Summit: <http://tinyurl.com/ncozgx>

State laws on cell phones, driving: <http://tinyurl.com/5k5bwy>

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