

# Feds weigh cell phone ban for bus, truck drivers

September 24 2009, By JOAN LOWY , Associated Press Writer

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(AP) -- Safety investigators told federal regulators three years ago that it was dangerous for bus drivers to talk on cell phones while driving and recommended a ban.

The National Transportation Safety Board put that recommendation on its list of most important safety measures. Industry and safety groups had no objections.

Yet the regulatory agency that would write new rules on cell phone use by commercial [drivers](#), the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, has done little more than study the issue.

Now, after several high-profile accidents that focused public attention on using cell phones on the road, the Obama administration has decided to act on the issue, which was left hanging by the Bush administration.

Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood will convene a two-day summit next week on distracted driving and plans to announce actions to address cell phone use by bus and truck drivers, said spokeswoman Jill Zuckman.

The NTSB's recommendation was prompted by a 2004 accident in which the driver of a motorcoach carrying students on a trip to Washington became so engrossed in a cell phone conversation that he failed to notice signs that said the height of an upcoming bridge was nearly 2 feet less than the height of the bus. The bus slammed into the underside of the bridge, shearing off the roof and injuring 11 passengers.

"He drove that bus right into that bridge. It was like a can opener - it just peeled the top back," said NTSB Chairman Deborah Hersman. "If you could see the picture, you would be shocked that there weren't fatalities."

The safety board recommended that the motor carrier administration prohibit commercial bus drivers from talking on cell phones except in emergencies and that it encourage states to do the same for school bus drivers.

The agency responded that it would study whether a new rule was needed and that the study would include whether cell phone use by all commercial drivers, including truck drivers, should be prohibited. It hoped to have answers last October.

An official for the motor carrier administration declined comment when contacted by The Associated Press.

Research clearly shows that cell phone use distracts drivers, safety experts said.

"When you are texting and talking on the phone, you might be going through the motions of doing what you need to be doing, but your head is not in the game," Hersman said.

As research has mounted, industry's resistance to regulation has faded.

"I don't know of any motorcoach operator that tolerates drivers using cell phones for any purpose unless they're pulling over for an emergency," said Victor Parra, president and chief executive of United Motorcoach Association, which represents tour bus operators.

Pete Pantuso, president of the American Bus Association, said a ban "is certainly something we do not oppose at all."

The American Trucking Associations is neutral on a ban on cell phone use by truck drivers until they see the wording of a proposal, but "we think cell phones and other electronic equipment should have some policies and regulations on them to prevent their misuse," said spokesman Clayton Boyce.

Even the wireless industry, formerly opponents of restrictions, supports a texting ban and is neutral on restricting [cell phone](#) use by drivers.

Seventeen states and the District of Columbia prohibit school bus drivers from using cell phones while driving. Eighteen states and the District of Columbia have passed laws making texting while driving illegal.

A group of Democratic members of Congress introduced a bill this summer requiring states to ban texting or e-mailing while operating a moving vehicle or lose 25 percent of their annual federal highway funding. It would be patterned after Congress' requirement that states adopt a national drunken driving ban.

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On the Net:

Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration: <http://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/>

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