

Stop sign ahead for texting while driving?

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In this July 1, 2009 file photo, U.S Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood speaks at the unveiling of an American-made prototype streetcar in Portland, Ore. Targeting text messaging behind the wheel, the Obama administration plans to offer recommendations to address the growing traffic safety risk of distracted driving and the use of mobile devices by multitasking drivers. (AP Photo/Don Ryan)

(AP) -- Targeting text messaging behind the wheel, the Obama administration plans to offer recommendations to address the growing traffic safety risk of distracted driving and the use of mobile devices by multitasking drivers.

Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, declining to provide specifics, said the administration's "priority now is to really deal with distracted driving as it relates to texting. ... We can really eliminate texting while

driving. That should be our goal."

Researchers, safety groups, automakers and lawmakers gathered Wednesday to discuss the perils of distracted driving, hearing sobering data from the government that underscored the safety threat as more motorists stay connected with cell phones and [mobile devices](#). The meeting was to continue a second and final day Thursday.

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, often by mobile devices and cell phones.

LaHood called distracted driving a "menace to society" and said the administration would offer a series of recommendations Thursday to encourage Congress, state governments and the public to curb the unsafe driving behavior. He said the government would draw from past efforts to reduce drunken driving and encourage motorists to wear [seat belts](#).

Sens. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., and Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., said support was building in Congress to ban text messaging by drivers. Their legislation would require states to ban texting or e-mailing while operating a moving vehicle or lose 25 percent of their annual federal highway funding.

"No text message is so urgent that it's worth dying over," Klobuchar told participants.

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 was 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 handheld cell phone, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. Many safety groups have urged a nationwide ban on texting and on using handheld mobile devices while behind the wheel.

The conference attracted families of victims of accidents caused by distracted driving, who urged the government to take a strong stance against cell phone use in vehicles, whether it includes a hands-free device or not. They suggested technologies that prevent the mobile device from receiving e-mails or phone calls while the vehicle is in motion could help address the problem.

"We started driving cars about 100 years ago. We started using phones about 80 years ago. We've only really combined those two activities to a great degree in the last five or 10 years. We're finding out they don't mix," said David Teater of Spring Lake, Mich., whose 12-year-old son, Joe, was killed in a 2004 crash when a driver using a cell phone ran a red light.

Some researchers cautioned that banning all cell phone use by drivers would undermine the development of in-vehicle safety technologies that could allow vehicles to share traffic information with other vehicles and alert emergency responders to air bag deployments and car crashes.

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

Industry officials said a broad public awareness campaign was needed to change people's penchant to stay connected with the office and loved ones at all hours. Tech-savvy young drivers, many with only a few years of experience on the road, are particularly apt to use the devices behind

the wheel.

"When it comes to distracted driving, there is a cultural perception that we all need to work together to switch," said Michael Petricone, senior vice president of government affairs for the Consumer Electronics Association.

On the Net:

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

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

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