

Curb The Car Technology, Government Asks

Joan Lowy, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Auto dashboards are becoming an arcade of text messages, GPS images, phone calls and web surfing, the government says, and it's asking carmakers to curb those distractions when vehicles are moving.

Manufacturers have been loading up higher-end vehicles with an array of built-in gadgets in an effort to tempt car buyers who want to multi-task behind the wheel in today's increasingly connected society. But the technological advances have raised concerns that drivers' attention is being diverted too much from the road.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration on Thursday proposed voluntary guidelines for manufacturers, including a recommendation that they design dashboards so that distracting devices are automatically disabled unless the vehicle is stopped and the transmission is in park.

"We recognize that vehicle manufacturers want to build vehicles that include the tools and conveniences expected by today's American drivers," said NHTSA Administrator David Strickland. "The guidelines we're proposing would offer real-world guidance to automakers to help them develop electronic devices that provide features consumers want without disrupting a driver's attention or sacrificing safety."

Gloria Bergquist, vice president of the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, said carmakers will review the guidelines, which have a 60-day comment period. She noted that the industry has had its own voluntary guidelines since 2002.

"Drivers are going to have conversations, listen to music and read maps while driving, and automakers are helping them do this more safely with integrated hands-free systems that help drivers focus on the road," Bergquist said.

The guidelines, which are directed at passenger cars and sport utility vehicles, would exempt safety devices such electronic-warning systems that alert drivers to potential collisions or lane changes. GPS and other navigation devices that provide directions would also be permitted while driving, but the safety administration is asking that the systems be designed so that drivers can't manually enter a destination unless the car is in park.

The alternative is for drivers to go back to studying maps while they drive, which is even less safe, Strickland said.

Bergquist, of the carmakers, cautioned about preventing addresses from being entered into GPS devices unless the vehicle is stopped.

"There are often passengers in the car who can enter addresses, so we need to

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consider that when looking at requiring these technologies to only be used in park," she said. "And if the GPS is disabled when moving, consumers can always bring their own Garmin into the vehicle. It's complicated."

Other dashboard technologies recommended for automatic disabling include text-messaging, Internet browsing, social media browsing, phone dialing and computer screen messages of 30 characters or more that are unrelated to driving.

The guidelines would make exceptions for these devices if they are designed only for use by passengers and can't be accessed or seen by the driver.

Manufacturers are also urged to take steps to make technologies safer that drivers are allowed to use while driving. That includes reducing to two seconds or less the amount of time drivers must divert their eyes from the road to use a device. Devices should also be designed so that drivers don't have to use more than one hand or glance through extraneous information.

The guidelines are a good first step toward reducing driver distractions, said Barbara Harsha, executive director of the Governors Highway Safety Association, which represents state highway safety offices.

But "the safest thing is for drivers not to use these systems at all — both hands on the wheel and the mind focused solely on driving," she said.

Anne Fleming, senior vice president of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, an industry-supported safety research group, said it's good that NHTSA and automakers are working together, but it "will be very hard to measure whether it's reducing distraction and whether it's reducing it enough."

One reason NHTSA decided to pursue voluntary guidelines instead of mandatory rules is that officials wanted to do something quickly, Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood told reporters in a conference call. The process for writing federal rules often takes years to complete.

The guidelines are also a way "to continue the drumbeat" that distracted driving is a serious safety issue that costs lives, said LaHood, who has been vigorously campaigning on the subject for more than three years.

NHTSA is also considering future guidelines to address portable electronic devices drivers carry with them in cars, including GPS navigation systems, smartphones, and electronic tablets and pads.

In December, the National Transportation Safety Board, which investigates accidents, said that texting, emailing or chatting on a cellphone while driving is simply too dangerous to be allowed and urged all states to impose total bans except for emergencies.

That recommendation was inspired by recent deadly crashes, including one in which a teenager sent or received 11 text messages in 11 minutes before an accident.

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There were an estimated 3,092 deaths in crashes affected by distractions in 2010.

Currently, 35 states and the District of Columbia ban texting while driving, and nine states and the District of Columbia bar hand-held cellphone use. Thirty states ban all cellphone use for beginning drivers. But enforcement is generally not a high priority, and no states ban the use of hands-free devices for all drivers.

Texting while driving increased 50 percent in 2010, the most recent year for which data is available, according to NHTSA. A government survey of drivers found that two out of 10 say they've sent messages from behind the wheel — and that spikes much higher among young adults.

AAA said it's important to ensure that dashboard technologies aren't simply making it more convenient and more appealing to drive while distracted.

"Available research evidence is extremely limited and highly inconclusive on the real risks that in-car communications technologies pose to drivers, even when systems are limited to voice-activation only," said AAA CEO and President Robert L. Darbelnet. AAA has a study under way to address that question, he said.

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