

STATEMENT OF CONGRESSMAN RICK BOUCHER

Subcommittee on Communications, Technology and the Internet and Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade and Consumer Protection Joint Hearing: Driven to Distraction: Technological Devices and Vehicle Safety

Good morning.

We convene this morning a joint hearing of the Subcommittee on Communications and the Subcommittee on Consumer Protection to consider safety issues associated with drivers distracted by wireless or other electronic communications devices in vehicles.

I appreciate the excellent cooperation of Chairman Rush of the Consumer Protection Subcommittee and his staff as we made preparations for today's hearing. By prior arrangement, I will chair the first portion of the hearing, and Chairman Rush will chair the balance.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that 25 percent of accidents involve some form of driver distraction, resulting in 5,870 deaths and more than 500,000 injuries.

Texting while driving would appear to be alarmingly prevalent, with 21 percent of drivers in a recent survey indicating that they have done so within the last month. Among less experienced teen drivers, that number more than doubles to 46 percent, and 51 percent admitted to cell phone use while driving.

The use of electronic devices while driving imperils not only the distracted drivers but all highway users. Those who are not distracted are victims of crashes caused by those who are.

We are interested in hearing this morning whether the problem is sufficiently egregious that a federal legislative response is now required and if it is what that response should be.

Some states have laws prohibiting the use of hand held cell phones by all drivers.

21 states and D.C. ban all cell phone use by novice drivers including both hand held and hands free phones.

18 states and D.C. prohibit text messaging by all drivers.

We are interested in learning how effective these laws have been and whether our witnesses believe that the time has arrived for federal legislation banning some or all of these practices, perhaps withholding federal highway funds from states that have not enacted the specified prohibitions.

There is also a role for public education, and the wireless industry has launched a campaign to educate the public about the dangers of distracted driving.

Is it time for the federal government to expand beyond these privately funded education efforts?

FCC Chairman Genachowski has suggested an aggressive public education campaign similar to the highly successful one promoting the digital television transition. I look forward to hearing his comments this morning on how such a campaign would be structured, including the respective roles of the public and private sectors, and his thoughts about how effective such a campaign might be.

Other suggestions from our witnesses for an appropriate federal response to the problem will be welcome as well.

Finally, I want to point out the excellence which has been demonstrated by Virginia Tech's Transportation Institute in evaluating the safety issues associated with driver distraction and inattention.

Tom Dingus, the Institute's Director, is on our second panel today, and he will discuss with us the pioneering work he and the Institute have accomplished in the use of naturalistic driving studies, through which sophisticated instrumentation is installed in vehicles for the continuous monitoring of driver behavior and performance.

Mr. Dingus has widely acknowledged national expertise on the use of naturalistic driving observation, having 25 years of experience in the field and having authored more than forty books, 150 technical publications, and 20 major widely read reports on the subject.

I congratulate Mr. Dingus for the advances in the field he and the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute have achieved.