

DISTRACTED DRIVING SUMMIT

Distraction: The performance degradation of a primary task upon introduction of a secondary act.

Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood convened an important two-day meeting in Washington DC last week to shine a light on the increasing incidents and opportunities to be distracted while operating a car or public transportation vehicle. Naturally, the Motorcycle Riders Foundation (MRF) was represented at that meeting.

With the amount of distraction from increased use of cell phones (some with full keyboards), GPS systems, DVD players and the vast array of other complex video displays at an all-time high, it should not come as a surprise that the opportunity for an operator of any vehicle to become distracted has risen significantly in just the past few years.

Distracted driving is certainly not a new issue. One could argue that the minute someone in Detroit came up with the idea to put lighters and ashtrays in cars, or when a little company called Motorola produced the first in-car audio entertainment device, or when Ray Kroc sold his first burger out of the window of his restaurant, distracted driving was born.

What's truly startling is the dramatic rise in the amount of "texting" people are doing behind the wheel. Some stats say sending and receiving text messages while driving is up 500 percent in just the past two years. Because of the complexities involved with typing on a handheld keyboard, some experts refer to texting while driving as the perfect storm for disaster.

The two-day meeting brought together experts of all types including auto manufacturers, cell phone providers, government officials, state legislators, behavioral experts and even a rocket scientist from NASA who specializes in the distraction of pilots under heavy cognitive load. Cognitive load is the amount of brain power you use to complete a task, relative to the complexity of the task, or as we learned, thinking about or talking about anything overly emotional. The other forms of distraction are visual (eyes off the road) or manual (hands off the wheel).

We know that distraction is a problem for all road users, and particularly motorcyclists and other vulnerable road users, but what can we do about it? Ray LaHood said it best when he opened the meeting with the statement, "You cannot legislate behavior." Eighteen states and DC have enacted texting-while-driving bans. While this is a good start, it's sort of missing the mark. Banning texting may remove one part of the equation, but that means it's still ok to eat a burrito, watch a movie, paint your nails, pick something up off the passenger side floor, or talk on a hands-free cell phone, all while checking out your hair in the flip-down vanity mirror. Any ban at the state level should be against all forms of distracted driving, not just a few specific forms.

THERE OUGHTA BE A LAW

Senator Chuck Schumer from NY and Amy Klobuchar from MN both made an appearance at the event to plug some legislation they both support. Their bill, inappropriately called the Alert Drivers Act, would force states to pass texting bans or forfeit a whopping 25% of their road money. The feds have a long history of using this sort of "carrot and stick" approach to forcing states to enact legislation, and it's problematic for a variety of reasons.

The MRF simply cannot support the bills (S. 1536 and HR 3535) to force states to pass texting bans for the simple reason that this is the same method that is used to force states to pass helmet laws, and blackmailing the states to enact legislation that they may or may not want should be strongly discouraged.

The two-day meeting is certainly a good start to the conversation about distracted driving, but far too much focus was given to texting instead of keeping all distractions on the table. We at the MRF hope that discussion continues, and we look forward to working with the powers that be to put distracted driving on the decline.

KILTS VS BIBS – ROUND FOUR!

I have to hand it to the Bibs this year. Those old guys spent the summer working out or something because they dragged us Kilts up and down the tug-o-war arena. After suffering devastating losses two years in row, the Bibs came back en force. Although league officials are murmuring about a possible violation in tug-o-war rules by the suspended bikers, we won't let that tarnish an otherwise flawless victory. So that leaves it all tied up for the ropers, 2 for the Bibs and 2 for the Kilts. Rumor is the Kilts are embarking on a vision quest sometime in the off-season to soothe the soul and re-emerge next fall in Peoria, IL for MOTM and the fifth show down. Don't miss round 5, the Thunder-Dome!