

## Senate Committee Holds Distracted Driving Hearing

The Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee recently held a hearing to look into the dilemma of distracted driving. Jeff Hennie, Vice President of Government Relations for the Motorcycle Riders Foundation (MRF), was in attendance. The MRF submitted an official statement for the record on this hearing. That document is available on the MRF website at [http://www.mrf.org/2009/CST\\_Statement\\_record\\_distracted.pdf](http://www.mrf.org/2009/CST_Statement_record_distracted.pdf).

Chairman Jay Rockefeller (D-WV) opened the hearing with a startling fact; at any given moment, 11 % of all of drivers on the road are holding an electronic device. That's over 800,000 people, and that's only one form of distraction. Rockefeller used this opportunity to unveil some new legislation. He and Senator Kay Bailey Hutchinson (R-TX) are introducing a bill that would provide grants to states to be used in anti-distracted driving efforts. When the MRF gets a look at the language regarding the requirements for obtaining these grants, a position will be established.

The Committee heard first from Senator Chuck Schumer (D-NY), who is not a committee member, but proposes withholding 25% of highway money for states until they enact a law that bans the practice of texting while operating a motor vehicle. His legislation S 1536 (and the companion bill in the House, HR 3535) would blackmail the states into passing a law they might not want. The MRF believes this is a state's rights issue first and foremost, and does not support withholding highway funds in this manner for any reason. Beyond that, Schumer's bill only singles out the worst of the worst forms of distraction. That's not good enough; the motorcyclists of this country deserve to have all forms of distracted driving discontinued voluntarily.

The Committee next heard from Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood and Federal Communications Commission Chairman (FCC) Julius Genachowski about what their respective agencies are doing or plan to do to stop distracted driving. The FCC is undertaking a consumer awareness campaign much like "click it or ticket." Secretary LaHood perhaps said it best when he said, "Education is number one," meaning let's use the carrot, not the stick, or in this case use the Rockefeller, not the Schumer. LaHood also had some interesting advice – using your brain. Moms, don't call your kids when you know they are driving. Bosses, don't call your employees when you know they are driving. Basically, be part of the solution. Just because you aren't driving doesn't mean the other half of your conversation isn't. Good advice for all of us. LaHood also called for a broader focus beyond texting and talking, such as cheeseburgers and CD changers and so on. Anyone remember the old Norelco commercials that attempted to make distracted driving look cool?

Committee member Senator Roger Wicker (R-MS) had perhaps the most interesting approach for the role of federal government in this issue – do nothing. He said, "Let's use the states as an incubator. A lot of states have passed good distracted driving laws; let's let them continue to do that and see what works and what doesn't, and go from there." This proposed approach drew some criticism, but it does make some sense.

Ultimately the federal government will get involved, and their solution is likely to be part carrot, part stick. As always, the MRF will keep you up to speed on this and all issues affecting motorcyclists.