



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

Date: June 13, 2003

In reply refer to: H-03-09

Honorable John E. Baldacci
Governor
State of Maine
State Capitol
1 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency charged by Congress with investigating transportation accidents, determining their probable cause, and making recommendations to prevent similar accidents from occurring. We are providing the following information to urge your State to take action on the safety recommendation in this letter. The Safety Board is vitally interested in this recommendation because it is designed to prevent accidents and save lives.

This recommendation addresses the need to add driver distraction codes, including codes for interactive wireless communication device use, to State traffic accident investigation forms. The recommendation is derived from the Safety Board's investigation of the February 1, 2002, Ford Explorer Sport collision with a Ford Windstar minivan and a Jeep Grand Cherokee on Interstate 95/495 near Largo, Maryland,¹ and is consistent with the evidence we found and the analysis we performed. As a result of this investigation, the Safety Board has issued nine safety recommendations, one of which is addressed to the State of Maine. Information supporting the recommendation is discussed below. The Safety Board would appreciate a response from you within 90 days addressing the actions you have taken or intend to take to implement our recommendation.

On February 1, 2002, about 8:00 p.m., on the outer lanes of Interstate 95/495 near Largo, Maryland, a 1998 two-door Ford Explorer Sport, traveling northbound at an estimated speed of 70 to 75 mph, veered off the left side of the roadway, crossed over the median, climbed up a guardrail, flipped over, and landed on top of a southbound 2001 four-door Ford Windstar minivan. Subsequently, a 1998 four-door Jeep Grand Cherokee ran into the minivan. Of the eight people involved in the accident, five adults were fatally injured, one adult sustained minor injuries, and two children were uninjured.

¹ For additional information, read National Transportation Safety Board, *Ford Explorer Sport Collision With Ford Windstar Minivan and Jeep Grand Cherokee on Interstate 95/495 Near Largo, Maryland, on February 1, 2002*, Highway Accident Report NTSB/HAR-03/02 (Washington, DC: NTSB, 2003).

The National Transportation Safety Board determined that the probable cause of the February 1, 2002, collision of the Ford Explorer Sport with the Ford Windstar minivan and Jeep Grand Cherokee was the Explorer driver's failure to maintain directional control of her high-profile, short-wheelbase vehicle in the windy conditions due to a combination of inexperience, unfamiliarity with the vehicle, speed, and distraction caused by use of a handheld wireless telephone. Contributing to the severity of the accident was the lack of an effective median barrier at the accident site.

This accident involved multiple risk factors, some of which are associated with young drivers. The accident driver, who was 20 years old, inexperienced, and unbelted, was operating a high-profile, short-wheelbase, sport utility vehicle, with which she was unfamiliar, 15 to 20 miles over the speed limit, while talking on a handheld wireless telephone.

The use of wireless communication devices is becoming increasingly prevalent. In May 2003, according to the Cellular Telecommunications & Internet Association, the number of U.S. wireless telephone subscribers was approximately 145 million. The 2003 Gallup Organization study² and the 2002 North Carolina study,³ which indicated that 25 percent and 58 percent of drivers interviewed, respectively, had used a wireless telephone while driving, suggest that the public may not be aware of the dangers associated with using a wireless telephone while driving.

In its 1997 report, *An Investigation of the Safety Implications of Wireless Communications in Vehicles*, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration discussed the scientific research on the use of wireless devices, as well as the limited crash data then available. The report offered a number of recommendations that included improving data collection and reporting and encouraging enforcement of existing State laws to address inattentive driving behavior.

Since the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration compiled its 1997 study of the safety implications of wireless communications in vehicles, the use of wireless devices has more than doubled (from 60 million subscribers in 1998 to more than 144 million in 2003), and further research has confirmed the detrimental effects of wireless telephone use while driving. This research has shown that drivers who use a wireless telephone while driving can lose situational awareness and experience "inattention blindness," suggesting that the cognitive effects, as well as the physical demands, of handheld telephone use are dangerous. Existing accident data pertaining to driver distraction, particularly wireless telephone use, may be misleadingly low.

Several reasons could account for this apparent discrepancy: (1) drivers are unlikely to self-report wireless telephone use during an accident; (2) police officers are not necessarily trained to detect wireless telephone use, nor are they required to report it in the majority of State accident reports; (3) obtaining and analyzing wireless telephone records is time consuming; (4) culling wireless telephone use from existing accident reports is difficult; and (5) currently, only 16 States⁴ have codes for driver distraction, including codes for wireless telephone use, on their

² Dawn Royal, *National Survey of Distracted and Drowsy Driving Attitudes and Behaviors: 2002*, Volume 1-Findings Report, The Gallup Organization, DOT NHTSA 809566, March 2003.

³ Jane C. Stutts, Herman F. Huang, and William W. Hunter, "Cell Phone Use While Driving in North Carolina: 2002 Update Report," University of North Carolina, Highway Safety Research Center, December 2002.

⁴ California, Florida, Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, Nebraska, New Jersey, New York, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Texas.

traffic accident investigation forms. The Safety Board therefore concludes that available data are insufficient to determine the magnitude of risks associated with wireless telephone use. Given the growing use of wireless telephones while driving and the need for greater research regarding the associated risks of such activity, the Safety Board believes that those States that do not have distraction codes should add them, including codes for wireless telephone use, to their traffic accident investigation forms.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the State of Maine:
Add driver distraction codes, including codes for interactive wireless communication device use, to your traffic accident investigation forms. (H-03-09)

The Safety Board also issued safety recommendations to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the American Driver and Traffic Safety Education Association, and The Advertising Council, Inc. In addition, the Board reiterated safety recommendations to the Federal Highway Administration and the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. In your response to this letter, please refer to Safety Recommendation H-03-09. If you need additional information, you may call (202) 314-6177.

Chairman ENGLEMAN, Vice Chairman ROSENKER, and Members GOGLIA, CARMODY, and HEALING concurred in this recommendation.

By: Ellen G. Engleman
Chairman