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Auto safety initiative seeks to reduce driver errors

Regulators are pushing for systems that thwart drunk drivers from starting their cars, help cars avoid collisions and prevent vehicles from starting if occupants don't buckle up.

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Drunk driving killed more than 10,000 people last year, about a third of traffic deaths. Above, a drunk-driving checkpoint in San Bruno, Calif. (Justin Sullivan, Getty Images / November 27, 2006)



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By Jerry Hirsch
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Auto safety regulators are pushing for new equipment to protect motorists from their biggest threat: themselves.

They're aiming to keep drunk drivers off the road with the help of onboard technology that immobilizes their cars. New vehicles may soon come with systems to help prevent collisions. And engines may not start unless occupants buckle their seat belts.

It's all part of a push by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to use technology to reduce traffic fatalities.

FULL COVERAGE: L.A. Auto Show 2013

"Ninety percent of all crashes have an element of human error," NHTSA Administrator David Strickland said. "We really need to focus on what more we can do to address these risks."

Automakers for years resisted federal safety initiatives, originally objecting to seat belts, air bags and more recently making backup cameras standard equipment. But for now they are supporting NHTSA's efforts.

"It is just the right thing to do," said Heather Rosenker, a General Motors Co. spokeswoman.

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The insurance industry and auto safety experts predict the government's initiative will improve driving safety, leading to fewer claims and deaths.

"This is the holy grail," said Russ Rader, spokesman for the

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Insurance Institute of Highway Safety.

Much of the technology already exists. Cars equipped with optional collision warning and automatic braking systems were at nearly every automaker's display at the Los Angeles Auto Show this week. Vehicles currently chime when a passenger isn't belted; automakers already know how to link that to the car's transmission to prevent the car from moving.

Now NHTSA and a coalition of 17 automakers are working on the so-called Driver Alcohol Detection System for Safety. The DADDS system uses sensors in the cabin to measure blood-

alcohol content by breath or touch to ensure a driver is below the legal 0.08% threshold for impairment.

Drunk driving killed more than 10,000 people last year, about a third of traffic deaths. About 3,000 people are killed annually in crashes they would have survived if they had buckled up, according to NHTSA.

Safety advocates and anti-drunk-driving groups support technology that grounds motorists before they can hurt themselves or others.

But some have reservations about these high-tech minders. The restaurant lobby opposes what it sees as an encroaching nanny state. Some analysts predict the equipment could add hundreds of dollars to the cost of each vehicle. And even some car enthusiasts say that imperfect technology could alienate the public it's supposed to protect.

Jack Nerad, an analyst with auto information company Kelley Blue Book, imagined a scenario in which sensors picked up alcohol on the breath of passengers, preventing the designated driver from getting them home.

"You are reliant on the technology to be 100% perfect or your car doesn't start," he said. "That makes people very, very angry."

Automakers have been down this road before. In the early 1970s, more than 50,000 people a year were dying on U.S. roads. In response, NHTSA mandated a seat-belt monitoring system that launched in the 1974 model year. It prevented vehicles from starting unless the front seat belts were fastened.

The public balked and a cottage industry sprang up to help drivers bypass the system, said Jeremy Anwyl, an automotive industry consultant and former chief executive of Edmunds.com. Then-President Gerald Ford beat a hasty retreat, ordering NHTSA to abandon the requirement for 1975 cars.

Anwyl suspects renewed efforts by government to keep tabs on driving behavior will elicit a similar outcry.

"People won't like the idea that all of a sudden they are no longer completely in control," he said. "They might not buy a new vehicle and instead just keep the car they have."

But increased awareness of the dangers of alcohol and distracted driving has some consumers eager to see the changes.

"I think those are great features," said Monterey Park retiree Joseph Tedros. "It will keep idiot drunks from getting on the road. It will keep people who drive too close to the car in front of them from rear-ending someone. And we all should use seat belts."

But there could be glitches.

Mistaken alcohol readings or faulty seat-belt sensors could put motorists in harm's way if they're stranded during emergencies or in remote places.

Where the DADDS system will set the blood alcohol limit could also prove contentious.

NHTSA says it will be the .08% level at which a driver is legally considered impaired, a ceiling that is supported by Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

"There will be no ifs, ands or buts about that," said J.T. Griffin, MADD's chief government affairs officer.

But a slightly higher limit might leave a margin of error that reduces false positives without greatly increasing the frequency of drunk-driving crashes, said Clarence Ditlow, executive director of the Center for Auto Safety.

The majority of people who were killed in drunk-driving crashes last year were in collisions in which a driver had double the legal limit, according to NHTSA data.

Some groups are already voicing objections, regardless of where the threshold is set.

"We are opposed to mandating this technology on all cars as original equipment," said Sarah Longwell, managing director of the American Beverage Institute, a restaurant trade association. "You are not going to solve the drunk-driving problem, which is a small, hard-core population of offenders, by treating everybody like a criminal."

She said drinkers could find ways to evade the technology. For example, they could quickly throw down some shots and already be on the road by the time their blood-alcohol level crosses the .08% limit.

"And then what is going to happen?" Longwell asked. "If you crash your car and you are well above the legal limit, can you sue the manufacturer? Who has the liability?"

Field testing of the DADDS system will take place at the NHTSA lab in Boston over the next two years. The government has not yet set a date for automakers to install this and other safety technologies in new vehicles, but NHTSA's Strickland says he wants to get them into cars as soon as possible.

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