

(DRAFT LETTER)

Dear Governor:

As you know, the wireless communications industry has grown at an extraordinary rate. Today there are more than 147 million cell phone subscribers – more than half of the U.S. population. According to a survey by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 6% of daylight driving time – up from 4% in 2000 – involves talking on the phone. That translates into more than 200 million in-car calls per day.

However, the primary responsibility of the driver has always been to operate a motor vehicle safely. It is a task that requires full attention and focus. Statistics show that all distractions, whether associated with the use of technology or not, can increase the risk of a crash.

NHTSA estimates that driver distraction contributes to about 25 percent of all traffic crashes. Though all distractions are a concern, we have seen the growth of a particular distraction, namely cell phone use while driving. While the precise impact cannot be quantified, we nevertheless have concluded that the use of cell phones while driving has contributed to an increasing number of crashes, injuries and fatalities.

Overwhelmingly, research worldwide indicates that both hand-held and hands-free cell phones increase the risk of a crash. Indeed, research has demonstrated that there is little, if any, difference between the use of hand-held and hands-free phones in contributing to the risk of driving while distracted. In either operational mode, we have found that the cognitive distraction is significant enough to degrade a drivers' performance.

We recommend that drivers not use these devices when driving, except in an emergency. Moreover, we are convinced that legislation forbidding the use of handheld cell phones while driving will not be effective since it will not address the problem. In fact, such legislation may erroneously imply that hands-free phones are safe to use while driving.

We will be working at the national level on an educational campaign to alert drivers to the risks associated with the use of wireless communication devices while driving. Meanwhile, we recommend that police agencies in your state vigorously enforce existing traffic laws whenever motorists operate vehicles in an unsafe manner as a result of distracted driving or other behavior.

Your state should also consider the vulnerability of novice drivers as it relates to distractions, including cell phone use. Countermeasures, including education and restrictions on cell phone use by novice drivers may be an appropriate way to address the problem.

To further assist you and the lawmakers of your state, NHTSA has developed a comprehensive summary of available research on the subject. It can be accessed through the website: www.nhtsa.dot.gov.

If my staff can provide you with further information, have them contact Ray Owings,
NHTSA Associate Administrator for Advanced Research and Analysis, (202) 366-1537.

Sincerely,

Norman Y. Mineta, Secretary