

Remarks prepared for
David Strickland, Administrator
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

For the
Fatality Analysis Reporting System Press Event

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Thank you Mr. Secretary. As encouraged as we are with the incredible gains we're making in reducing traffic fatalities, we will not rest on past performance. The roster of safety issues we work on is lengthy, and we know we must improve our understanding of the dangers that continue to threaten drivers and passengers – dangers such as distracted driving.

The quickest and straightest line to that understanding is timely, accurate, and accessible data. Data is the lifeblood of our safety work at NHTSA. And our work in changing driver attitudes and behavior behind the wheel is grounded in that data, which lays the foundation for sound science and careful engineering.

Improving our data collection and analysis procedures is an on-going process at NHTSA. As a part of that continuous improvement process, we are refining the way we collect data on distracted driving and establishing the groundwork for additional research to capture real-world information on this risky behavior.

For 2010, NHTSA introduced a new measure of fatalities related to distracted driving, *Distraction-Affected Crashes*.

When a police officer investigates a serious crash there are a range of clues that can indicate that distraction may have played a role. In the past, FARS recorded a generic set of potential distractions. The new definition focuses on a

narrower set of distractions that are most likely to affect crash involvement.

For example, careless driving and the presence of a cell phone in the vehicle by themselves are no longer counted in the new measure. Focusing our data more accurately on the behaviors we are trying to change is part of our normal way of doing business. This effort to refine data is similar to a step taken with alcohol information in FARS data for 2006. Prior to 2006, FARS reported *Alcohol-Related Crashes*, which we defined as crashes in which a driver, pedestrian or bicyclist had a blood alcohol level of .01 or higher. In an effort to focus on crashes in which alcohol was most likely to be a causative factor, NHTSA introduced the new measure, *Alcohol-Impaired Driving Crashes*, with a more narrow definition that included only

those crashes in which a driver or motorcycle rider had a blood alcohol level of .08 or above, the legal limit in every state.

This explicit change in methodology means we cannot compare the 5,474 “distraction-related” fatalities reported in 2009 to the 2010 number of distraction-affected crashes.

As part of its commitment to reduce the problem of distracted driving, NHTSA will continue to look for improved data sources. Police reports of serious crashes are an important source, but are limited by the evidence available to the officer. We are working to optimize information from crash reports by improving reporting forms and officer training.

We are expecting very important new data on driver distraction from a naturalistic study by TRB in which nearly 2,000 cars will be fitted with cameras and other equipment that will record driver behavior for a period of two years.

Researchers will be able to use these data to associate driver behaviors with crash involvement. Data from this study will be available in 2014.

Other NHTSA data confirms and amplifies that driver distraction continues to be a significant problem. The agency's nationwide observational survey of drivers in traffic remains unchanged between 2009 and 2010, with 5 percent of drivers seen talking on handheld phones. In addition, given ongoing challenges in capturing the scope of the problem—including

individuals' reluctance to admit behavior, lack of witnesses, and in some cases the death of the driver—NHTSA believes the actual number of crashes that involve distracted driving could be higher.

A national telephone survey we are releasing today paints a clear picture of the complexity of the distracted driving problem reflecting the reality that it is both hard to measure and difficult to address given conflicting public attitudes and behaviors.

For example, more than three-quarters of the drivers told us they answer calls on all, some, or most trips when they are behind the wheel. Also, they said there are very few driving situations when they would not use the phone or text, and

that they rarely consider traffic situations when deciding to use their phone.

Yet these very same people told us they feel unsafe as a passenger if their driver was sending or receiving text messages. More than one-third of these same drivers said that they would feel very unsafe if their driver was using a handheld phone.

Support for both texting and handheld laws is high, reaching 94 percent for a ban on texting or e-mailing while driving and 71 percent for a ban on hand-held cell phones.

It is obvious we have much work to do. Under President Obama and Secretary LaHood's leadership, the men and

women of NHTSA will not relent on any of our safety efforts.

Safety is the department's top priority, and as the nation's

highway safety Agency, we are on point. Thank you.