

Transportation Dept. tells commercial bus, truck drivers no texting

By Joan Lowy, AP

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WASHINGTON — The Transportation Department said Tuesday it is prohibiting truck and bus drivers from sending text messages on hand-held devices while operating commercial vehicles.

The prohibition, which applies to drivers of interstate buses and trucks over 10,000 pounds, is effective immediately, the department said in a statement. Truck and bus drivers who text while driving commercial vehicles may be subject to civil or criminal penalties of up to \$2,750, the department said.

Nineteen states and the District of Columbia already prohibit all drivers from texting behind the wheel, according to the Governors Highway Safety Association. Another 10 states restrict texting by novice drivers.

Trucking and bus industry officials said they support the texting ban.

"A lot of our members already have policies in place. It's just safe and smart," said American Bus Association President Pete Pantuso.

The prohibition doesn't apply to onboard devices that allow dispatchers to send text messages to truck drivers, but most of those devices have mechanisms that prevent their use while a truck is in motion, said Clayton Boyce, a spokesman for the American Trucking Association.

The trade association for the wireless industry, CTIA, also supports a ban on texting and e-mailing while driving, said Amy Storey, a spokeswoman for the association.

"While mobile devices are important safety tools, there's an appropriate time and an inappropriate time to use them," Storey said.

Research by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration shows that drivers who send and receive text messages take their eyes off the road for an average of 4.6 seconds out of every 6 seconds while texting, the department said. At 55 miles per hour, this means that the driver is traveling the length of a football field, including the end zones, without looking at the road, the department said.

Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood has been campaigning against texting and cell phone use while driving. President Barack Obama signed an executive order directing federal employees not to engage in text messaging while driving government-owned vehicles or with government-owned equipment. Federal employees were required to comply with the ban starting on Dec. 30, 2009.

LaHood said enforcing restrictions on texting and cell phone use by drivers will be difficult. He urged the wireless industry to work with public officials to come up with a solution.

Everyone knows texting or talking on the phone while driving is dangerous, LaHood told reporters, but people do it anyway.

The Transportation Department and safety advocates have also joined forces to create FocusDriven, an organization to campaign against cell phone use or texting on handheld computers while driving. The organization will be modeled after Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, which has successfully lobbied for tougher drunk-driving laws.

Democratic Sens. Charles Schumer of New York and Robert Menendez of New Jersey have introduced legislation to prod states to pass laws banning texting by all drivers. The bill would reduce federal highway aid by 25 percent to states that don't enact bans.