

Feds ban texting by truck, bus drivers

By Larry Copeland, USA TODAY

A crackdown on texting while driving entered a new phase Tuesday when the federal government banned the practice on handheld devices for bus drivers and commercial truckers. Three senators said the federal ban does not go far enough and urged the Obama administration to support legislation calling for every state to ban texting while driving. The new restrictions take effect immediately and apply to interstate truckers and operators of vehicles carrying at least eight passengers. Violators face penalties up to \$2,750.

"This helps to establish a uniform safe application of texting bans around the country," said Anne Ferro, head of the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration. "This is a high-risk behavior. Drivers who text take their eyes off the road for (an average of) 4.6 seconds. In this congested environment, we cannot allow these conditions to continue."

The move comes as legislatures in 23 states consider bans on texting. Ten of those states restrict texting by novice drivers. Nineteen states and the District of Columbia already prohibit texting while driving for all drivers, according to the Governors Highway Safety Association. "The dangers posed by texting while driving are the same whether you're behind the wheel of an 18-wheeler or a four-door sedan," said Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y.

Schumer and Sens. Robert Menendez, D-N.J., and Kay Hagan, D-N.C., propose legislation that would strip states that don't enact texting bans of 25% of their federal highway funds. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood acknowledged that enforcing texting bans is challenging. "The enforcement part is critical, and it may be the most difficult part," LaHood said. "We're at the starting gate on this. We're going to figure out a way to enforce these requirements."

Alberto Gutier, director of the Arizona Governor's Office of Highway Safety, emphasized the difficulty of enforcement. "How do you know the person was texting and not dialing a number?" he said. "We need to go after distracted driving, but distracted driving can be so many things. I see people doing all kinds of stupid things. ... People reading their mail. I see people putting in contact lenses."

Joining LaHood and Ferro at a Washington news conference to support the federal ban were officials of the nation's two major trucking organizations, **the American Bus Association that represents 1,000 motor coach and tour companies**, and road safety advocates. The American Trucking Associations last year distinguished between texting with handheld devices and on-board computers used to get directions and communicate with dispatchers. The group now supports rules banning drivers from texting on those computers while the truck is moving, said spokesman Clayton Boyce.