



Written by [Kelly Holt](#) on November 22, 2010

Car Cellphone Calls To Be Jammed?

Popsci.com, the online version of Popular Science, reported November 19 that the Obama administration is considering disabling cellphones in cars. The effort is said to be an attempt to stop distracted driving and reduce cellphone-related deaths.

Popsci quoted Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, well-known national crusader against distracted driving, who said federal officials are looking at the technology: "I think it will be done. I think the technology is there and I think you're going to see the technology become adaptable in automobiles to disable these cell phones. We need to do a lot more if we're going to save lives."



Last Tuesday LaHood announced a new [video campaign](#), called "Faces of Distracted Driving." The *New York Times* wrote on November 18 that a new video will be released every few weeks, aimed at raising awareness about the consequences of distracted driving. Videos feature people who have lost loved ones due to distracted-driving related crashes.

The *New York Times* continued with a quote from David Teater, senior director for transportation initiatives for the National Safety Council. He indicated that he expected the campaign to make an impact. "Putting a face on distracted driving really gets people to move," he said, as the public was often more responsive to personal stories than to data or scientific evidence.

Last year more than 5,500 people were killed in these crashes, according to the Department of Transportation (DOT).

A recent [poll](#) shows that nearly two-thirds of those polled support a national ban on cellphone use while driving. However, U.S. DOT spokeswoman Olivia Alair comments, "The Department of Transportation currently has no plans to endorse any particular technology."

The poll did not ask how people feel about government-issued phone scramblers or other disabling devices. But many are asking if such a measure is in the purview of the federal government rather than at a state level, or any level.

The Daily Caller (Nov. 18) asked the same question, claiming the measure may be up against not only technical difficulties, but also questions regarding [government intrusion](#). The Caller continued:

Even correctional facilities couldn't convince the FCC to allow cell phone jamming. In early 2009, the Washington D.C. Department of Corrections petitioned the FCC to experiment with phone jamming technology. Prison officials had contended that they need the technology to prevent inmates from using contraband cell phones to plan breakouts. After first permitting the jamming technology, the FCC backed away. Later that year, legislation introduced by Texas Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison (R) to allow phone jamming in prisons was referred to a subcommittee.



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The FCC stepped back because while it recognized the issues prison officials faced, tech blog Ars Technica noted "rules are rules, and Section 333 of the Communications Act specifically forbids any "willful or malicious interference with [a] licensed radio signal."

Adam Thierer, senior research fellow with the Technology Policy Project and Technology Policy Program at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, observed: "It's just not particularly a well-thought-through plan. The question is: how do you even begin to make this mandate work?"

Thierer said it would be a bureaucratic nightmare figuring out how to install the technology production and determining if older automobile models would be required to install similar devices. "Then there's the problem of a much-needed emergency "off" switch. But if there's such a switch in the car to disable it, people are going to preemptively throw that switch."

Thierer also noted that a mobile jamming device would not only disrupt a cellphone in the car but also phones in the vicinity of the moving vehicle. "The thing that's really is crazy about this is that there are so many better approaches to dealing with this problem before we would go to such an extreme step to suggest that we should have jamming technology in every vehicle."

James Guttuso, senior fellow in regulatory policy at the Heritage Foundation, pointed out that the technology wasn't such a bad idea, as long as it was voluntary: "It has some very positive uses. It's when the government gets its hands on it and imposes [it] universally ... [that] you have problems."



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