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Federal Workers Urged Not to Talk and Drive

Federal agencies have been asked to discourage their employees from using hand-held wireless phones while driving government-owned or -leased vehicles.

The U.S. General Services Administration, the agency that provides facilities and management services to other federal agencies, is stopping short of imposing a ban on using hand-held cellular phones while driving.

But in a notice published in the March 1 Federal Register, it recommended that agencies discourage driving while talking.

"A recent National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) survey found that 54 percent of motor vehicle drivers in the United States usually have a wireless phone in their vehicle," the GSA observed. "Federal and state policymakers have been weighing the benefits of wireless phone use in vehicles against the growing evidence of their potential to increase driver distraction and the risks to safety. The recent ban of hand-held wireless phones while driving in New York State and pending legislation in at least 27 other states has received significant publicity in 2001. In addition, 23 countries now restrict or prohibit wireless phones in motor vehicles."

The agency added: "It is appropriate that the federal government assume a leadership role in promoting the safe use of wireless telephones by its employees when they are engaged in official government business."

Besides discouraging talking while driving, the GSA had these recommendations for federal agencies:

- Provide portable, hands-free accessory kits for government-owned wireless phones.
- Educate employees on driving safely while using hands-free wireless phones. For guidance, it referred to "Cellular Phone Driving Tips," published by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). The tips include:
 - Safe driving is your first priority. Always buckle up, keep your hands on the wheel and your eyes on the road.
 - Make sure that your phone is positioned where it is easy to see and easy to reach. Be familiar with the operation of your phone, so that you're comfortable using it on the road.

- Use a hands-free microphone while driving.
- Make sure your phone is dealer-installed to get the best possible sound quality.
- Use the speed dialing feature to program in frequently called numbers. Then you can make a call by touching only two or three buttons. Most phones will store up to 99 numbers.
- When dialing manually without the speed dialing feature, dial only when stopped. If you can't stop, or pull over, dial a few digits, then survey traffic before completing the call. (Better yet, have a passenger dial.)
- Never take notes while driving. Pull off the road to jot something down; if it's a phone number, many mobile phones have an electronic scratchpad that allows you to key in a new number while having a conversation.
- Let your wireless network's voice mail pick up your calls when it's inconvenient or unsafe to answer the car phone. You can even use your voice mail to leave yourself reminders.
- Be a cellular Samaritan. Dialing 9-1-1 is a free call for cellular subscribers; use it to report crimes in progress or other potential life-threatening emergencies, accidents or drunk driving.