

Washington Poll: Maybe Cell Phone Law Wasn't Such a Popular Idea

by NAMIC

A recent poll by PEMCO Insurance shows that drivers may be having second thoughts about the state's new law governing handheld cell phone use while driving, now that the law is in force and law enforcement officials are tagging violators with tickets.

In February 2008, prior to the law's enforcement, the majority of Washington drivers thought the law did not go far enough, allowing police to ticket handheld cell phone users only if they are stopped for another more serious offense, known as a primary offense.

In the most recent poll, results show the number of primary-offense supporters has slipped and now only half of respondents think the law should be more severe.

Unlike other states with similar laws, Washington was the only one to classify the violation as a secondary offense when the law went into effect July 1, 2008.

"Washington drivers recognize that cell phones are a distraction, and our poll results show that most still agree that cell use should be regulated to keep our roads safe," said PEMCO spokesperson Jon Osterberg. "The percentage of drivers who support the law as a primary offense has slipped, so we'll continue to track how the law is perceived."

PEMCO has been tracking awareness and attitudes toward cell phone legislation since February 2004. In February 2008, before the law went into effect, 60 percent of respondents said that talking without a hands-free device while driving should be treated as a primary offense. Now, just three months after using a handheld device while driving became illegal, fewer drivers — 50 percent — support the violation as a primary offense.

PEMCO's most recent poll shows that awareness about the law and how it is classified has increased significantly. When polled in February 2008, just 38 percent of respondents understood the law was a secondary offense. Now, seven out of 10 are aware they can't be pulled over merely for talking on a cell phone. Additionally, 97 percent of those polled were aware that handheld usage while driving is illegal.

Despite the waning support of more stringent enforcement of the law, PEMCO's poll indicates drivers are adjusting their behavior in compliance with the law.

One in three Washington drivers now report using a hands-free device more often in response to the law, and the same percentage say they talk on cell phones less while driving.

Perhaps not surprising, younger drivers are significantly more likely than their older counterparts to prefer that the law remains a secondary offense. For their part, younger drivers are also more likely to admit that they talk on the phone only if they don't see a law enforcement person nearby (19 percent versus 4 percent).

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