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Alcohol-Sensing Technology - Standard in All Cars?

The long-term transportation funding bill just approved by Congress includes funds for researching alcohol-detection technology that could eventually be standard equipment in all new cars.

That funding — $5 million over two years — should have been stripped from the bill because it "uses American taxpayer dollars to fund something they're not going to want in their cars," said a group representing the restaurant industry.

Since 2008, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the nation's automakers have been researching technology that can non-invasively measure a driver's blood-alcohol content and prevent a vehicle from starting if the driver is legally drunk. The national research effort is the Driver Alcohol Detection System for Safety (DADSS).

The DADSS researchers are testing approaches that:

•Use "tissue spectrometry" to measure a driver's BAC. Sensors in places such as the steering wheel, gear shift and ignition read blood-alcohol levels through the driver's fingertips.

•Use "distant spectrometry," a breath-based method in which multiple sensors in the vehicle's cabin assess the alcohol concentration in the driver's exhaled breath.

Researchers expect to have a "drivable test vehicle" within about two years. "We think 8-10 years is the earliest a consumer would see this as an option in an auto," Newton said.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving, an advocate of in-vehicle alcohol detectors, said the research funds are well spent. "Drunken driving costs the U.S. $132 billion each year, and we think that $5 million ... is a good use of transportation dollars to potentially eliminate the problem," said J.T. Griffin, senior vice president for public policy.

To learn more about Drinking and Driving. click here.

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