

SAFETY

Pets can be a deadly distraction

Unrestrained animals are a danger to drivers, and some states and cities are taking action

By SUE MANNING
ASSOCIATED PRESS

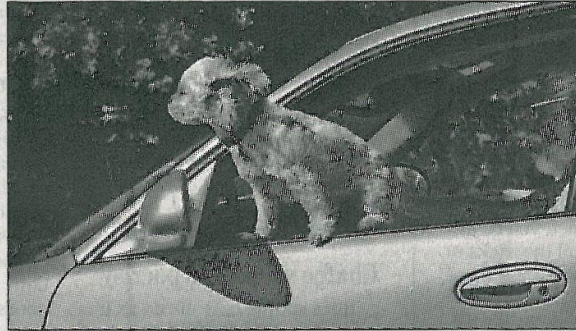
LOS ANGELES — Man's best friend is not a driver's best friend.

While lawmakers have been banning drivers from texting or using cell phones, many motorists are riding around with another dangerous risk — their dogs.

Experts say an unrestrained dog — whether curled up on a lap, hanging out the window or resting its paws on the steering wheel — can be deadly. Tens of thousands of car accidents are believed caused every year by unrestrained pets, though no one has solid numbers.

"An unrestrained pet can be hugely distracting — if he is seeking your attention, putting his face right in front of yours, starts chewing up the upholstery or is vomiting because he is carsick," said Katherine Miller, director of applied science and research for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

The issue is drawing attention in some statehouses. Hawaii is the only state that spe-



AP / ROBIN LOZNAK

Pets that lean out windows, rest paws on the steering wheel or otherwise distract the driver can cause an accident.

cifically forbids drivers to operate a vehicle with a pet on their lap. But Oregon lawmakers are considering fining drivers who hold their pets behind the wheel. And some cities are taking action, too.

In 2009, 5,474 people were killed and 448,000 injured in crashes caused by distracted drivers in the United States, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Cell phones were the top distraction — the cause of 18 percent of the fatalities and 5 percent of the injury crashes. The agency does not track accidents caused by pets, but said they are counted among other distractions such as disruptive passengers, misbehaving children or drivers

jectile or get crushed by a driver or passenger who is thrown forward by the collision.

Good pet owners will use a harness or carrier and secure their pets in the middle of the back seat, Miller said. That keeps dogs from getting hurt or bouncing around and hurting others.

"A pet that weighs 50 pounds, in a 35 mph collision, is projected forward like a cannonball with 1,500 pounds of force, and that can cause critical injuries to the folks in the front seat," Miller said.

Restraining a pet also keeps the animal from running off after a crash.

who attempt to put on make-up or read.

Author Stephen King suffered several broken bones and a collapsed lung in 1999 when he was hit by a driver who claimed he was distracted by his dog.

In a crash, an unrestrained pet can turn into a deadly pro-

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