

# Driving disconnect

Data shows motorists' cell-phone use dangerous

A lot of people who would never drink alcohol and then drive are, nevertheless, weaving through traffic, driving too slowly and failing to react quickly to what happens on the road — much the same as drunken drivers.

University of Utah research confirms it, and we've all witnessed or experienced it ourselves. Still, only Salt Lake County and Salt Lake City have done anything about it. They have wisely banned their employees from using cell phones in their work vehicles. The Legislature should follow suit. It should ban cell-phone use for all of us while we're behind the wheel.

"For" us because, apparently, it will take an act of the Legislature to convince some of us to eliminate that one, very dangerous, distraction. But doing so could prevent an accident. It could even save a life.

Statistics on how many accidents are caused by cell-phone use are unreliable. Investigating officers are reluctant to list it as a cause without conclusive evidence, which is often elusive. Police officials say cell-phone use is underreported as a cause of accidents, but they don't know by how much.

Put simply, few victims are found still clutching their phones. And those who can talk often don't want to admit they were chatting while driving.

Murky statistics aside, the Utah Department of Public Safety reports that crashes determined positively to be cell-phone related increased from 135 in 2003 to 218 in 2005. Just in the past few months, four people have died in such preventable accidents.

Would a statewide ban work to prevent accidents? Without reliable statistics, it's hard to say for sure. But Salt Lake County Risk Manager Jeff Rowley says he believes the county ban has at least helped cut the county employee accident rate from 130 in 2005 to 118 in 2006 and only 35 so far this year.

Researchers at the U. say cell-phone users exhibit different deficiencies in their driving skills than do drunken drivers but that both are dangerous. Other studies show cell-phone use is the most common driving distraction but no more risky than such things as putting on makeup, reading or searching for a CD.

However, cell-phone use by drivers, including text-messaging, is increasing. And so are the accidents and deaths. That should be enough to get legislators to act. We urge them to do so, for all of our sakes.