Get Off The Phone While Driving

Local News

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Olympia, WA - Citations written by Washington state troopers for cell phone violations increased more than five-fold after state legislators changed the violation from a secondary to a primary offense.

Today is the one year anniversary of the change. Elevation to primary meant that troopers could pull people over for cell phone violations. Previously, as a secondary offense, troopers could only cite if they observed some other violation first.

“The legislature gave us this law, and our troopers have made good use of it,” said State Patrol Chief John R. Batiste. “We believe that distracted driving is a factor in far more collisions that we know about, and we are determined to address that.”

In the eleven months ending May 15, 2011, troopers wrote 6850 citations to drivers who held a phone up to their ear. In the final eleven months under the secondary law, only 1344 tickets were written.

Citations for texting also more than doubled, from 225 to 549.

“Texting is much harder for troopers to see and prove,” Batiste said. “People really need to voluntarily refrain from this very dangerous behavior.”

Troopers are using education as well as enforcement to win driver compliance. In the same eleven-month period, a total of 14,518 drivers were stopped for cell phone violations, and 1244 for texting.

Troopers decide whether to cite or warn based on totality of circumstances, and they typically cite for only about half of all violations they witness.

The State Patrol faces a challenge in determining how many collisions are caused by distracted driving generally or cell phones specifically.

In a speed or DUI related crash, investigators have physical evidence they can rely on. But a crash caused by cell phone use or texting requires self-reporting by the causing driver. Only in the most serious collisions can troopers get a search warrant to examine someone’s cell phone.

“We don’t see a lot of cell phone involvement in fatal collisions,” Batiste said. “The big killers remain speed, DUI and the failure to wear a seat belt.

“We do think there may be more fender benders than drivers will admit. Those still tie up traffic and annoy those of us stuck in the backup. When you’re driving, you need to be

driving.”

The fine for a cell phone or texting violation is $124.