Government paves the way for self-driving cars

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Obama administration officials are beginning to introduce guidelines for safely bringing self-driving cars to the nation's roads. The goal is to avoid creating so many obstacles that the technology can't get to people quickly.

Automakers and tech companies have been testing self-driving models on roads for several years, with a human in the driver's seat just in case. The results suggest that what once seemed like distant technology could be fast approaching.

Safely Harnessing Technology For Good

Federal officials have struggled with how to gain the technology's promised safety benefits while making sure the cars are ready for broad use. A benefit is that the cars can react faster than people, and they don't drink alcohol or get distracted. Officials hope the new guidelines will bring order to what has been a chaotic rollout so far.
President Barack Obama wrote about the hopes for self-driving cars in an opinion piece in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Such cars might save thousands of lives on U.S. roads each year and change the lives of the elderly and the disabled, he said.

"Less congested, less polluted roads. That’s what harnessing technology for good can look like," Obama wrote. But he added: "We have to get it right. Americans deserve to know they’ll be safe today even as we develop and deploy the technologies of tomorrow."

**Embracing The Future**

One self-driving expert said the tone of the guidelines signaled that the federal government has embraced autonomous, or automated, driving. "In terms of just attitude, this is huge," said Bryant Walker Smith, a law professor at the University of South Carolina who tracks the technology. He cautioned that many details remain unclear.

The government did make clear that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) will seek recalls if needed. Recalls require car makers to fix or upgrade cars they have sold. They can be costly for manufacturers. The government expects partially-autonomous systems to make driver-passengers pay attention.

The agency, which is part of the transportation department, released guidelines showing how NHTSA can use recalls to regulate technology. Semi-autonomous driving systems must account for distracted driver-occupants who do not take control of the vehicle in an emergency, the department said. Otherwise, it may be defined as too risky and subject to recall.

**Learning From The Tesla Crash**

NHTSA says the guidelines aren’t aimed at electric car maker Tesla Motors. But the bulletin would address events like a fatal crash in Florida that occurred while a Tesla car was using the company’s Autopilot system. The system can brake when it spots obstacles and keep cars in their lanes. But it failed to spot a crossing tractor-trailer and neither the system nor the driver braked. Autopilot allows drivers to take their hands off the steering wheel for short periods.

Tesla has since announced modifications so Autopilot relies more on radar and less on cameras, which it said were blinded by sunlight in the Florida crash. The company has maintained that Autopilot is a driver-assist system. Tesla said it warns drivers they must be ready to take over at any time.

**Federal Responsibility, Not A State’s**

Officials said federal regulators, rather than states, should be in charge of self-driving cars. Their reasoning is that the vehicles are essentially controlled by software, not people.
States have set the rules for licensing drivers. However, when the driver becomes a computer, "we intend to occupy the field," Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx said. States should stick to registering the cars and dealing with questions of responsibility when they crash, he said.

Automakers should also be allowed to formally confirm the safety of their autonomous vehicles by following a checklist, said officials. They should be able to do this on their own. Though companies are not required to follow the checklist — it is voluntary — Foxx said he expects compliance.

It's in their interest to meet the standards to gain the confidence of regulators and the public, Foxx said.

However, officials also said the NHTSA is examining whether it should have the authority to approve whether the vehicles are safe before they are sold. The government would inspect and approve technologies like autonomous vehicles. That would be a change from the agency's self-check system and might require action from lawmakers.

Officials spoke to reporters ahead of a news conference set for Tuesday. There, they plan to provide more details.

NHTSA has been striving to make the guidelines a brief framework, rather than a lengthy set of standards and regulations. The agency’s administrator, Mark Rosekind, has said he wants the guidelines to be adjustable to keep up with the changing technology.

**Keeping Up With Changing Tech**

Some safety supporters have argued against voluntary guidelines. They prefer safety laws. But the rule-making process can take years to complete.

Automakers sought the NHTSA guidelines in part because they fear a patchwork of state laws will slow or complicate selling self-driving cars. Some state lawmakers see the rise of autonomous cars as a way to attract technology companies and spur economic growth. They are proposing laws friendly to the technology.

Michigan is considering bills that would allow the testing of self-driving cars without brakes or pedals on state roads. New York, on the other hand, has a law that requires drivers to keep one hand on the wheel at all times. The old law would not work with new self-driving technology.
Quiz

1. Which section of the article explains why automakers wanted federal guidelines?
   (A) "Safely Harnessing Technology For Good"
   (B) "Embracing The Future"
   (C) "Federal Responsibility, Not A State's"
   (D) "Keeping Up With Changing Tech"

2. Select the paragraph from the section "Federal Responsibility, Not A State's" that explains why self-driving car standards should be updated over time.

3. Which two of the following sentences from the article include central ideas of the article?
   1. President Barack Obama wrote about the hopes for self-driving cars in an opinion piece in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.
   2. The agency, which is part of the transportation department, released guidelines showing how NHTSA can use recalls to regulate technology.
   3. Tesla has since announced modifications so Autopilot relies more on radar and less on cameras, which it said were blinded by sunlight in the Florida crash.
   4. Automakers should also be allowed to formally confirm the safety of their autonomous vehicles by following a checklist, said officials.

   (A) 1 and 2
   (B) 2 and 3
   (C) 2 and 4
   (D) 3 and 4

4. Which statement would be MOST important to include in a summary of the article?
   (A) The government is working to make safety standards for self-driving cars.
   (B) States should be in charge of rules for licensing drivers.
   (C) Autopilot systems have failed to spot hazards in self-driving cars.
   (D) Some states are thinking about testing self-driving cars without brakes or pedals.