



# Oregon

Theodore R. Kulongoski, Governor

Department of Transportation

Office of the Director

355 Capitol St. NE, Room 135

Salem, OR 97301

**DATE:** February 14, 2007

**TO:** Senate Judiciary Committee

**FROM:** Amy Joyce, Legislative Coordinator for Highway Division

**SUBJECT:** SB 521

## Introduction

Senate Bill 521 prohibits engaging in distracting activities, including the use of mobile communication devices, while driving on a highway. SB 521 would restrict the use of the Department's two-way radio communication system to all but ODOT's Emergency Response Vehicles, hampering the effectiveness of our maintenance and other safety crews.

## Discussion

ODOT has a statewide radio communication system used by maintenance and construction staff for a variety of purposes. ODOT has four dispatch centers that communicate by two-way radio with the maintenance fleet on the highway system across the state. Vehicle operators also communicate among one another to coordinate work. Unlike cell phone conversations, ODOT's radio communications are very brief, and use codes for brevity. Senate Bill 521 would seriously impair maintenance operations by restricting our ability to communicate.

We commonly have only one person in a maintenance vehicle. Having to stop every time radio communications were necessary would be impractical. Many of our mountain passes do not have a place to safely stop due to snow berms covering the shoulders. Some long stretches of highways do not have shoulders wide enough to immediately pull over in a safe manner. The reduced communication capabilities would increase the time it would take ODOT to report road and weather conditions to the public. It would hamper the ability to perform safety checks on our staff in remote locations. And it will slow communications regarding road incidents and hazards, and therefore will slow response times.

Radio communication while driving a vehicle is also necessary for multiple-vehicle operations. The driver of an ODOT pilot vehicle leading a string of cars through a one-lane construction zone needs to communicate with the flaggers at either end of the zone. Sometimes we run several snow plows in a staggered line down a single stretch of highway to create a clearer, and therefore safer, path for drivers. The operators of those plows, moving in unison, need to be in constant communication to adjust to conditions. Clearing ditches along the highways, and spraying herbicides, are also multiple vehicle operations that require radio coordination while operating the vehicles.

ODOT is requesting an exemption for radio communications by operators of public maintenance vehicles in the performance of their official duties.

**Summary**

SB 521 will impair ODOT's maintenance and operations of the state highway system. It would increase the time it takes to get good information and good service to the traveling public, to plow snow, and clear hazards. The safety of motorists and of ODOT workers depends at least in part on the ability of maintenance workers to be in radio contact with dispatchers. We ask the committee to support an exemption for radio communications by operators of public maintenance vehicles in the performance of their official duties.