

New spyware gives drivers a brake

GPS-linked boxes hold cars to speed limit

BY JEFF GRAY

It's the last thing many motorists would want — a permanent, electronic back-seat driver, forcefully reminding them not to speed.

But Transport Canada is road-testing cutting-edge devices that use global positioning satellite technology and a digital speed-

limit map to know when a driver is speeding, and to try to make them stop.

When a driver hits a certain percentage above the posted speed limit, the device kicks in and makes it difficult to press the accelerator.

While the idea appeals to some road-safety experts, even the researcher in charge of the project ad-

mits many drivers — some of whom have shown fierce resistance to photo-radar and red-light cameras — may balk at the science-fiction scenario of a machine forcing them to apply the brakes.

"We are trying to assess the operational acceptance issues," said Peter Burns, chief of ergonomics and crash avoidance with Transport Canada's road safety directorate.

See SPYWARE on page A7

CANADA • A7

Electronic backseat drivers hitting the open road

SPYWARE from page A1

While this pilot trial is believed to be the first of its kind in North America, similar devices have been tested in several European countries, including Sweden, the Netherlands and Britain. Dr. Burns said proponents of such devices are enthusiastic about the potential to reduce deaths and injuries from car crashes, as well as reduce greenhouse-gas emissions, which are greater at higher speeds.

"Excessive speed is a leading road safety challenge," Dr. Burns said, noting that speeding is a contributing factor in 25 per cent of fatal crashes across Canada.

Ten cars, driven by volunteers

and outfitted with the Swedish-made speed-limiting system, are on Ottawa's roads — minding the speed limits, one presumes. Researchers hope to collect enough data by spring to see if the system actually changed the drivers' speeding habits, before going ahead with a larger trial.

Using another 10 volunteer drivers, the project will also test the Otto Driving Companion, a less intrusive and commercially available system designed by Persentech, a Winnipeg firm. The dashboard-mounted device also uses GPS technology, but only warns drivers with a voice alarm and a light when they start to speed.

The \$290 devices are on sale in

'Certainly speeding is a problem. If you have a way to control it, you have to take a look at it.'

Winnipeg and Ottawa and will be available in Edmonton, Calgary and Red Deer starting this week.

Company president Frank Franczyk said he has sold 400 of the devices in Winnipeg alone. He said conscientious customers appreciate the blue speed-warning light and even the voice that warns them they are going too fast.

Some say their children speak up when they see the alarm go off.

"They say, 'Hey mom, the blue light's on. Why are you speeding?'" said Mr. Franczyk, who has plans to expand the service to Toronto, Hamilton, Vancouver and the United States.

His device, which can be updated on the Web with new digital maps, can also be set to tip off drivers about high-risk intersections, pedestrian crosswalks, deer crossings and red-light cameras.

The system can be set to go off when the vehicle is travelling anywhere from 2 to 10 per cent above the speed limit. The voice alarm can also be turned off.

In Europe, proponents have said that the technology should be mandatory in all vehicles or that insur-

ance companies might offer discounts to drivers who use it.

In Britain, the more intrusive speed-limiting system is being suggested as a way to eliminate that bane of modern roads: the traffic-calming speed hump.

Toronto City Councillor Doug Holyday, who has led a lonely battle against the proliferation of what he says are hundreds of unneeded speed humps in Canada's largest city, said computerized speed-limiters appeal to him.

"It would certainly be better than having all these speed humps everywhere," Mr. Holyday said. "Certainly speeding is a problem. If you have a way to control it, you have to take a look at it."