

# ASLEEP AT THE WHEEL

*Dozing Drivers Highlight Auto-Driving Threat*

Since 2016, I have used this column space on a number of occasions to sound the alarm concerning self-driving vehicles. Recent news reports regarding a Tesla on autopilot speeding down a Massachusetts highway with its driver and passenger both seemingly sound asleep, would appear to further validate the concern that has been raised.

What if there had been a motorcyclist riding in front of that vehicle and the traffic came to a sudden halt? Would the vehicle's autopilot have detected the motorcycle in front of it and stopped before careening into it? The truth is, nobody really knows for sure. Yet, such a vehicle that is capable of operating without a conscious driver, is allowed on our roadways.

According to one of the news reports, Tesla has implied that video showing the sleeping driver was a hoax and claimed its cars would not allow users to fall asleep at the wheel. Tesla reportedly said that its "driver-monitoring system repeatedly reminds drivers to remain engaged and prohibits the use of Autopilot when warnings are ignored."

The video seemed convincing enough to make me not want to ride a motorcycle anywhere near a Tesla. Even if it was a hoax, the video shows a driver slumped over with his eyes closed, not exactly a picture of safety. The Massachusetts example was not an isolated incident, as another Tesla driver was apparently caught on video asleep at the wheel in the San Francisco Bay area in June.

As reported on page 12 of this magazine, Waymo, the self-driving car unit of Google parent company Alphabet, Inc., has asked the National

Highway Traffic Safety Administration to remove regulatory barriers for self-driving cars that do not have brake pedals or steering wheels. You may recall a recent story from this magazine regarding the involvement of a motorcyclist on Waymo's automated vehicle development team. We can only hope that Waymo's effort has led to the development of a vehicle that can detect motorcycles in all situations.

As increasingly more vehicle manufacturers attempt to put driverless or semi-autonomous vehicles on our roadways, we as motorcyclists must be ever vigilant in our efforts to ensure that such vehicles can detect motorcycles. We must also be more acutely aware of the presence of such vehicles, and never assume that we will be detected by the vehicle's technology.

As stated in previous columns, if implemented properly, automated-vehicle technology promises to greatly enhance motor vehicle safety. Proper implementation, however, requires the consideration of

all elements of our existing traffic mix. Failure to do so is likely to result in the elimination of elements of the traffic mix that can no longer be accommodated due to the limits of the technology in use.

While on the subject of technology, an area that has experienced exponential growth is electric vehicle technology. To be more specific, the proliferation of electric motorcycles remains robust. As battery technology advances and affords electric motorcycles greater range, we will continue to see growth in this area.

From the CSC City Slicker, which you can have delivered to your door for about \$2,900, to the \$11,000 Zero DS to the \$30,000 Harley-Davidson LiveWire, there seems to be something for

everyone and for every budget. There are many other options in between each of these, but the bikes mentioned illustrate the diversity of product currently available in this segment.

When the first electric motorcycles became available, they seemed to be more of a novelty than something ridden by serious motorcyclists. Now, electric motorcycles are rapidly becoming mainstream.

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Not having to deal with the ill effects of too much ethanol in the fuel currently available in the marketplace has a certain appeal. As long as our federal government continues to force higher and higher percentages of ethanol into our available fuel supply, it makes fuel without ethanol more scarce, thereby creating more interest in electric vehicles.

After my first experience riding an electric motorcycle about six years ago, I wrote that I didn't expect them to replace their gas-powered predecessors anytime soon—and they likely never will. I am not so sure about that anymore. I am still partial to motorcycles of the gas-powered variety and still think their replacement by electric motorcycles is well off in the future, but it isn't as far off as I once thought.

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**By Rob Dingman**