

WILL 'SMART CARS' BE SMART ENOUGH?

Making Sure Motorcycles Are Part Of The Conversation

The information contained in this month's feature story entitled "Watching for Motorcycles" represents yet another example of why the AMA is so critical to the future of motorcycling. There are some really exciting advances in automotive technology headed our way. But the utilization of "intelligent transportation systems," or ITS, in cars, SUVs and trucks without consideration of its impact on motorcyclists could have dire consequences on the safety of motorcyclists—or even on the very existence of motorcycles.



By Rob Dingman

For motorcyclists, ITS means more than just automated highways and hands-off driving. ITS includes everything from automated toll collection to collision-avoidance systems to heads-up displays, "black boxes" that track your movements and more.

The AMA has been speaking up about how motorcycles will figure into the ITS mix for many years. In the 1990s when I was the AMA Washington representative, we worked closely with congressional leaders to get language incorporated into transportation bills to ensure that federal ITS research considered the needs of motorcyclists. We were heavily involved in the ITS issue then, and we continue to be a leader in that area for motorcyclists today.

We want motorcyclists' voices to be heard. If ITS is developed with riders in mind, we will not only negate disadvantages but we will also see benefits.

For example, there is talk of highways of the future being automated so that the highway regulates the speed of the cars and trucks, and may even steer the vehicles. How would motorcycles and their riders be accommodated by such an automated highway? My best guess is they wouldn't. We motorcyclists would need our own lane. And we don't want to hand over control of our bikes to the "intelligent" highway.

Collision-avoidance systems on cars could be good for motorcyclists. If the car radar systems are able to detect motorcycles, then maybe some car-bike crashes could be avoided. A "smart" system would be able to detect all those motorcycles that these drivers don't see and stop cars from entering our path of travel. For such crash-avoidance technology to be effective, it would need to "see" around curves, and it would need to alert drivers of approaching motorcycles so the drivers don't make left turns in front of them.

However, we have numerous concerns. If collision-warning systems are beeping every time vehicles gets close, car drivers may be tempted to ignore or disable the audible warning system. And, if drivers already don't see motorcycles, will they see warning lights on their own dashboard or mirrors signaling the presence



of motorcycles? Would drivers become complacent and overly dependent on this safety technology, leading to more car-motorcycle crashes?

Too many in our community don't take issues like these seriously enough, saying, "Oh, that will never happen." But believe me, this is just one of a number of threats happening all around us. And by that I mean the gradual erosion of our right to ride motorcycles. We have seen it with the ban on the sale of youth-model motorcycles and ATVs under the guise of protecting our kids from the dangers of lead poisoning. We have seen it with a circumvention of public input into processes that have led to increasingly restrictive public land management intended to exclude off-highway vehicle use. We have seen it with a singling-out of motorcyclists for roadside inspections and special taxes that were originally intended to support motorcycle safety programs—only to have the revenue diverted to unrelated purposes. We have seen it with onerous exhaust system labeling requirements targeting solely motorcycles. And we are seeing it with the rushed introduction of fuel into the marketplace that isn't even suitable for motorcycles.

The AMA's early involvement in ITS has helped ensure consideration of our needs, but even now the perceived value of this technology in the automotive world can easily eclipse our interests if we are not persistent. ITS technology is already available in a variety of cars. Make no mistake, even more ITS technology will soon be available on cars sold all over the globe. We continue to work closely with our counterparts in other countries to share information and provide input regarding the public policy concerns that we have.

There is a lot of ITS research going on, and you can read about some of it beginning on page 46. While we have many concerns that have yet to be addressed, let's offer a tip of the hat to companies like Honda and BMW that are incorporating motorcycles into their ITS research and product development.

In a way, the future is now, and we are already guinea pigs on the road to the intelligent transportation systems of the future. The AMA remains committed to guarding the interests of motorcyclists in this area, now and in the future.

Rob Dingman is the AMA president and CEO.