
Black Boxes Fact Sheet

There are millions of cars and trucks already equipped with black boxes, otherwise referred to as event data recorders.

Most of these devices capture rudimentary information just prior to an accident. The activation of an air bag initiates the retention of this information and allows for subsequent retrieval of data such as vehicle speed, seat belt use, and brake application.

Black boxes and related automated recording equipment are being promoted as “research” devices that can aid automobile companies and government agencies in the design of safer vehicles.

This is a laudable, and perhaps plausible, justification for the installation of black boxes in a sample of privately owned passenger vehicles. This assumes the owner’s knowledge and permission.

However, from a research perspective, there is no rational or scientific need nor justification to equip tens of millions of vehicles on a perpetual basis with black boxes.

Equipping several thousand vehicles with black boxes will result in the same scientific findings that would result from equipping the entire vehicle fleet of 200 million vehicles with black boxes, and for far less money.

While denials abound there is good reason to believe that the promotion of universal black box installation in new vehicles has more to do with regulatory, enforcement, judicial, and corporate economic interests; all at the expense of vehicle owners who are forced to pay for and retain this form of self-surveillance.

Reasonable legislation on black boxes, and similar automated recording devices, will permit the alleged research function while preventing the use of this equipment to the detriment of uninformed and unwilling vehicle owners and operators:

- 1) Black boxes may be installed on a sufficient number of vehicles to guarantee scientifically valid results that can lead to vehicle safety improvements. The vehicle owners should willingly agree to the installation of the devices and there should be no coercion to accept the installation. (Coercion includes the corporate practice of inflating the base price of a product or service and then reducing the price through “discounts” for desired behavior or equipment. A car without a black box should not cost more than a car with a black box.)
- 2) Prohibit insurance companies from requiring as a condition of coverage or payment access to black box and related recording device information.
- 3) Prohibit the coerced use (subpoena, court order, discovery) of black box and related recording device information for enforcement and judicial purposes.
- 4) Permit the vehicle owner to use his or her black box and related recording device information for his or her purposes in civil and criminal matters.
- 5) Vehicle owners should be able to activate, de-activate, and read without any special or expensive equipment, black boxes and related recording devices, conveniently and with equal effort for either function.
- 6) Black boxes and related monitoring devices should not be enabled to transmit or broadcast data to any external wireless receiver.
- 7) Require that the installation and operation of black boxes be completely independent from the operation of all other vehicle systems and components to the extent that these systems and components operate normally when the black box is disabled and not collecting data.