



MONITOR

Speed, Radar Detectors And Safety

New Australian Survey Validates Concept Behind SWS

Before there was a Safety Warning System® (SWS®), there was drone radar—unmanned radar transmitters placed in construction zones as a reminder for drivers to check their speed and pay attention. And before there was drone radar, police officers found they could accomplish the same thing by leaving their radar units switched on while parked at an accident scene or work area. And before that was the belief—sometimes unpopular—that radar detectors did not cause motorists to drive dangerously.

From the late 1970s to the early '90s, proposals to ban radar detectors were put forward in at least 30 states and the federal government. A now-inactive national organization of detector manufacturers, vendors, owners and motorists' rights advocates—the Radio Association Defending Airwave Rights, Inc. or RADAR—successfully defeated the vast majority of these initiatives by arguing that, first, police radar frequently makes mistakes or is misused and drivers deserve to be able to protect themselves, and, second, there is no evidence that radar detectors pose a threat to safety or enforcement.

Relative to the second argument, RADAR in 1987 commissioned a survey by the highly respected polling

firm of Yankelovich Clancy Shulman to learn about drivers' experiences with radar detectors and their safety records both with and without the devices. The bottom line: Detector users, as a group, appeared to be safer-than-average drivers. RADAR went on to lay the groundwork for the Safety Warning System, based on the idea that a technology closely related to the radar detector could be used to improve traffic safety.

In Australia they are still fighting the battle to keep radar detectors legal. A group similar to RADAR, known as the Australian Drivers Rights Association, recently conducted a survey of its own. The findings bolster the 1987 Yankelovich study and make it even more apparent that banning detectors would do nothing to help make Australia's roads safer. If anything, a ban—which would include SWS-enhanced models—could prove a setback to improving safety as the Safety Warning System gains a foothold.

The ADRA Study

Facing a potential ban of radar detectors in West Australia and realizing there was little hard evidence on either side of the debate for or against the devices, the ADRA in February 2000 contacted 300 randomly selected

detector owners by telephone, fax and e-mail. The first 200 responses were then analyzed.

One of the most surprising findings was that while just over half of the respondents said the average speed they drive did not change after fitting a radar detector, 41 percent responded that they drove slower. Most who reported that they did drive faster than the posted speed indicated they did so in rural areas and that they stayed with the flow of traffic. (Research has shown that those who drive significantly faster or slower than the average speed of traffic are more likely to be involved in an accident.)

Almost 70 percent of respondents said they were more aware of enforcement while using a radar detector. (Research has found that the more visible traffic enforcement is, the more effective it is.) More importantly, 86 percent said they were more aware of their speed, 71 percent were more aware of speed limits and 82 percent paid closer attention to driving conditions. A detector helped two-thirds combat fatigue, and close to three-fourths said they believed they were safer drivers with their detector than without.

Only 4 percent said they had been involved in an accident while using a detector. Of those who had an accident,

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SAFETY WARNING SYSTEM, L.C.

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it was almost evenly divided whether excessive speed was a factor, and 71 percent said they were not judged at fault in the incident.

Ninety-two percent of the Australian drivers said their detectors did not allow them to speed without regard for the law. In fact, 45 percent reported they had received speeding tickets while using a detector.

More than 60 percent reported their annual mileage at 20,000-40,000 kilometers (about 12,500-25,000 miles). Ninety-three percent of the respondents were male, and 37 percent fell into the age range of 26-35 years.

The Yankelovich Study

The 1987 study by Yankelovich Clancy Shulman differed in several ways. First, it used a larger sample—1,000 respondents—who were chosen nationwide at random from among both those who did and did not use radar detectors. Additionally, a variety of other questions were asked so that it was not apparent that the poll was “about” radar detectors. However, where the questions were similar, the findings of the American and Australian studies support one another.

For instance, detector users reported driving an average of 24,200 miles per year, while nonusers drove 12,200 miles. Nine percent of the detector users reported having been involved in an accident the previous year, compared to 7 percent for nonusers. However, when accident rates

were calculated it was found that detector users drove an average of 233,900 miles between accidents, while the other drivers traveled 174,600 miles. In other words, detector users had 23 percent fewer accidents on a per-mile-driven basis—a more accurate measure of exposure and a very significant difference.

As another indicator of safety, the radar detector users were more likely to use their seatbelts—69 percent for detector users versus 57 percent for nonusers on trips of 10 miles or less, and 81 percent versus 69 percent on longer trips. (Remember, this came at a time when seatbelt use was much lower than today, and legislators were just beginning to pass mandatory-use laws.)

American radar detector users also tended to be male (89 percent) and similar in age to the Australians (29 percent ages 25-34 and 25 percent ages 35-44). Interestingly, the Yankelovich study found that detector users were better educated, had higher family incomes and were employed in professional, business and white collar jobs when compared against nonusers.

What’s It All Mean?

The Australian survey asked other questions that we won’t address here, relating to enforcement and drivers’ rights. Since speed limits were increased to more appropriate levels in recent years, radar detector bans have decreased as an issue in the United States. Still, the results of both polls sound a cautionary note against prohibiting these devices.

Why? For starters, both studies show that radar detector users are as safe as, if not safer than, other drivers. Also, the Australian survey in particular demonstrates that radar detector users have a healthy respect for enforcement and the knowledge that a detector won’t protect them from a well-deserved ticket.

The Australian Drivers Rights Association study highlights what we said at the beginning of this article: Radar detectors encourage drivers to pay closer attention to what is going on around them. That’s what the Safety Warning System is all about too, except that SWS gives drivers specific information about what they should be watching out for—a stopped school bus, an emergency vehicle, an active railroad crossing. And don’t forget that many millions of drivers still use conventional radar detectors, which give a rudimentary (but still useful) warning when encountering an SWS transmitter.

The beauty of the Safety Warning System is the fact that many motorists already have invested in their half of the SWS equation—the receiver. Stand-alone SWS receivers may be in the pipeline soon, but in the meantime it is SWS-enhanced radar detectors that are carrying the load, and millions of drivers are signaling their support of the Safety Warning System concept by purchasing these devices. Banning radar detectors anywhere in the world will hurt the distribution and effectiveness of this important, highly affordable Intelligent Transportation System. ■

SWS Becomes Part Of Florida’s New Motorist Awareness System (MAS)

The Florida Department of Transportation has placed the Safety Warning System on the agency’s list of approved traffic control products, paving the way for inclusion of the SWS as an integral part of a new project aimed at improving safety in work zones.

Work zone fatalities are a persistent problem across the nation. In 1999, there were 868 such deaths, up from 772 in 1998. Florida recorded 30 work zone fatalities in 1999. (Texas and California led the nation with 132 and 112 deaths, respectively.) With

significantly more road work on tap over the next two years, the problem is not likely to improve on its own.

Research shows that drivers do not slow down sufficiently in response to static speed control measures alone

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...*Motorist Awareness System (MAS)*
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(signs and flashing lights). Law enforcement is effective at reducing speeds, but it can become a drain on police manpower for long-term projects and isn't always practical on multi-lane highways. Florida's Motorist Awareness System (MAS) mixes high-tech messaging devices with traditional signs and law enforcement to more effectively slow traffic in areas where road construction and maintenance is taking place.

The MAS uses variable message signs tied into Safety Warning System transmitters to alert drivers as they approach active work zones. The message delivered by the signs and SWS transmitters can be changed as necessary. Low-power AM radio transmitters, one of the most important parts of the system, tell motorists what

to expect ahead. Radar speed display trailers show the speeds of approaching vehicles while showing what the speed limit is for the work area.

Approaching drivers can be informed of lane closures, reasons for delays, advance warning of day or night work zones, that fines will be doubled in active work areas, special messages for large trucks, standard safety warnings and special weather alerts generated by the National Weather Service. Messages can be changed and the system can be switched on or off remotely by telephone. The MAS is intended to be shut down when no work is taking place in the zone.

Drivers going through a MAS zone also will see the usual complement of warning signs. Police officers will patrol the zones intermittently to reinforce the concept that speed limits are to be obeyed.

Even though the Safety Warning System messages and warnings can be received only by drivers using SWS-enhanced or conventional radar detectors, other drivers should notice the detector-equipped vehicles slowing and pay closer attention to the signs and radio messages.

The Florida DOT's March 31 approval of the Safety Warning System means it can be used not only in conjunction with MAS installations, but also in any location where SWS messages would be appropriate to help improve safety. The Safety Warning System can deliver more than 60 messages in five categories—highway construction or maintenance, highway hazard zone advisory, weather related hazards, travel information/convenience and fast/slow-moving vehicles. The messages cover everything from detours to poor road surfaces and tollbooth warnings to advisories about fog or ice. ■

We're on the Web!
www.safetyradar.com

Safety Warning System® Participants

SWS Receiver Licensees:

- BG Tech America, Inc., Fort Lee, NJ – Phone: (201) 363-0550
- BEL-Tronics, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada – Phone: (905) 828-1002
- Escort, Inc. (Owner/Licensee), West Chester, OH – Phone: (513) 870-8500
- SK Global America, Inc., New York, NY – Phone: (212) 906-8254
- Uniden America Corporation (Owner/Licensee), Fort Worth, TX – Phone: (817) 858-3300
- The Whistler Group (Owner/Licensee), Chelmsford, MA – Phone: (978) 244-1400

SWS Transmitter Licensees:

- Innovative Technology of America, Champaign, IL – Phone: (217) 351-8805
- MPH Industries, Inc., Owensboro, KY – Phone: (270) 685-6545