

# Will All New Cars in Europe Be Equipped With eCall Telematics Units by 2010?

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Posted: 05.November.2007 04:08 PM

Source: [http://www.abiresearch.com/Blog/Telematics\\_Blog/440](http://www.abiresearch.com/Blog/Telematics_Blog/440)

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Remember eCall, the EU's high profile in-vehicle emergency call and assistance project which will save up to 2500 lives on the European roads every year, reduce medical costs and lessen the impact of accidents on the traffic flow. eCall emergency calls will be activated manually via a dedicated button or more importantly automatically by the activation of in-vehicle sensors connected to e.g. airbags when an accident occurs. A 112-voice connection will be established and time, location and vehicle information will be sent to a public safety answering point via an in-band communication protocol.

Up to now EU member states – and a few non-member states - have been signing the Memorandum of Understanding at a steady pace, the Czech Republic, Portugal and Spain joining on 18 September 2007. The Netherlands are also expected to sign soon. However, important countries such as France and the UK still haven't shown any intention of signing the MoU. France allegedly wants to protect the interests of PSA, one of the car manufacturers which has developed a proprietary emergency telematics system. Worse still, discussions about standards and technology, business model and financing are still very much ongoing, further endangering the 2010 implementation target date.

"There are good reasons for the car manufacturing and telematics industry to adopt and implement eCall," says Monica Schettino, Project Manager at Ertico, who represents the interests and expertise of around 100 Partners involved in providing Intelligent Transport Systems and Services (ITS) in Europe and coordinates their contribution to the eCall project of the European Commission. "eCall technology and infrastructure is tested and proven, end users' willingness to have it in their next car is at more than 70 %. eCall standards will be open for other telematics applications, and the benefits of eCall for increased safety, cost reduction and environmental impact are beyond doubt. The main requirements the EU is imposing are the use of the 112 emergency number and pan-European interoperability. More convincing socio-economic arguments for the full deployment of eCall will be the results of the EC co-funded Pan-European Field Operational Tests, planned to start in 2008 and aiming to assess the socio-economic impact of the system at European level."

By the way, the focus on pan-European interoperability is fully justified. It is a key requirement that car drivers can benefit from the same eCall service wherever they are. The early integration of roaming functionality into the GSM standard proved to be one of the key success factors of GSM technology.

However, the stakes are high in the telematics space with many companies seeing each other as potential competitors vying for a position to take advantage of the expected boom in telematics applications, following the explosion of consumer navigation systems. Expecting them to work together on a common cause may just be too much to hope for. The GSM association has stated repeatedly that a solution based on existing commercial assistance implementations would be an easier way forward. But maybe this is a missed opportunity for the car industry as eCall would be a great way to improve its tarnished image.

However, Viviane Reding – European Commissioner for Information Society and Media – does not give up just yet. She has made some bold statements recently. If sufficient progress would not be made soon, she would consider imposing an eCall Directive replacing the current non-binding MoU-based voluntary framework with binding legislation. Ok. Good. And what if member states refuse to implement the directive in time? Impose penalties followed by reminders for those not wanting to pay them? All too familiar. Either way, it seems unlikely eCall will meet its deadlines. The lengthy implementation process of the US E911 guideline may serve as an example.

The consensus model just does not seem to work in this highly competitive technological environment. Maybe the role of governments should be limited to enforce standards. But ETSI and CEN keep watching how representatives of the telematics industry wrestle over the thorny SMS versus in-band issue. Maybe the industry does not want standards. This is not the most efficient way but it does leave all options open. The increasing awareness about the commercial value of safety may prove to be a sufficient incentive for the industry to move forward.

Is the EU focusing on the wrong project? Should it focus more on active safety, accident prevention and traffic reduction? What about imposing speech recognition technology in all in-car electronics equipment – portable or built-in – replacing the dangerous text entry? This would be a positive, stimulating measure compared to the current repressive legislation. What about imposing special routing algorithms for trucks in navigation devices to optimize the overall flow of traffic for the benefit and safety of everybody. Or, even better, putting in place legal frameworks and incentives to stimulate home working. This would reduce traffic levels and increase safety dramatically. However, these measures are politically much more sensitive as they touch on Europe's labor laws and socio-economic fabric.