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Photo radar gone soon, Harris says

Ontario's new government just awaiting measures to improve highway safety

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TORONTO – Photo radar will be dead in Ontario as soon as the new Progressive Conservative government prepares a package of measures to improve highway safety, Premier Mike Harris announced yesterday.

The measures, which will not include photo radar, are being prepared by the Minister of Transportation and the Solicitor-General and will be presented to the cabinet next week.

If they are approved, "it will not take very long" before Ontario's four photo radar vans are pulled off the highway, Mr. Harris said after his government's first cabinet meeting yesterday.

Former premier Bob Rae, whose NDP government started the photo radar trial, questioned the government's decision. "I think it is unwise," Mr. Rae told reporters. "I think it puts human lives at risk, which is not something that a reasonable government would want to do."

Although the radar vans went on the road only last summer and the province's trial of the system was still incomplete, Mr. Harris said the cabinet had decided that the two ministries behind the trial had not been able to prove the case for photo radar.

"What we have is that they [the two ministries] have no evidence to present to us and could not present us with anything that indicated that photo radar was responsible for reducing accidents, or reducing deaths, or reducing injuries," he said.

Safety officials have said removing the photo radar vans from the road after less than a year would provide less time than needed to evaluate the technology.

Government data show there was a sharp drop in highway deaths last year on roads

Fatal traffic accidents investigated by OPP

| YEAR | ACCIDENTS | DEATHS | INVOLVING SPEEDING | INVOLVING ALCOHOL |
|-------|-----------|--------|--------------------|-------------------|
| 1989 | 729 | 867 | 371 | 188 |
| 1990 | 614 | 744 | 270 | 129 |
| 1991 | 628 | 741 | 354 | 172 |
| 1992 | 645 | 758 | 273 | 171 |
| 1993 | 641 | 755 | 180 | 133 |
| 1994 | 553 | 637 | 141 | 154 |
| 1995* | 182 | 205 | 41 | 28 |

*to May 31

Source: OPP Traffic and Marine Branch

patrolled by the Ontario Provincial Police, which is the only police force in Ontario to use photo radar, a system of camera-equipped vans that catch speeders by photographing their licence plates. The drop from about 750 deaths a year to 637 last year coincided with the introduction of photo radar, a graduated licensing plan for new drivers and more airbags in new automobiles.

Mr. Harris did not give reporters any of the information on which the cabinet reached its conclusion about the efficacy of photo radar. But he said that it, and the information that will be developed as data are compiled from the trial of photo radar, will be made public "in the fullness of time."

"We obviously concluded that the over-riding consideration for photo radar, as opposed to other methods of [speed] control, was cash revenues to the province. We are not interested – in making a decision on safety on the highways – in using cash as the deciding factor."

John Bates, founder of Mothers Against Drunk Driving Canada, said "it's really dumb to cancel this thing."

He said that "the only people who want to

cancel photo radar are the people who speed. They are the same people who pass you on the right shoulder."

Mr. Bates noted that the cabinet made its decision on the very day that an authoritative insurance-industry publication in the United States published an article that says photo radar is helping to improve road safety in Ontario.

While in opposition, the Conservatives said that photo radar, rather than being an effective safety measure, was only a revenue grab by a cash-hungry government and promised to abolish it as soon as the party took office.

Mr. Rae said the NDP government made the decision to use photo radar to fight speeding because they had been advised by the police that it was the most up to date and effective technology available.

The decision to end its use, Mr. Rae said, was "all about the ideology of this government, the ideology that Mr. Harris has."

Referring to a recent public-opinion poll indicating that a majority of Ontarians now support photo radar, Mr. Harris said yesterday he interprets this poll as meaning that most Ontarians want the government to take steps to improve safety on the highways.

The article EM9533 reprinted above is used in Figure 2.2d of the STAT 332 Course Materials.