

Google Pushes for Federal Regulation of Self-Driving Cars

By Joyce Li, J.D. Candidate 2018 | March 30, 2016

The self-driving car [race](#) is on and Google is in the [lead](#). Google plans to move full speed ahead, but faces some hefty regulatory roadblocks.

The California Department of Motor Vehicles approved and implemented a set of [“testing” regulations](#) for self-driving cars in September 2014, but has been reluctant to allow much leeway in its “deployment” guidelines. A [preliminary draft](#) released in December 2015 outlined extensive constraints on autonomous vehicle design, such as a steering wheel, brake pedal and licensed driver capable of taking immediate control, among other limitations. The draft was a blow to Google who hopes bring its self-driving car to market by [2020](#) without the traditional [manual controls](#).

A [patchwork](#) of rules is emerging as individual states struggle to find appropriate guidelines for self-driving vehicles. But, Google has taken its fight to the federal stage. In a victory for self-driving technology companies, the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration informed Google in February 2016 that their artificial intelligence software legally qualifies as a [driver](#) under federal law. However, the preliminary federal report released March 11 required that the autonomous cars comply with existing motor vehicle safety standards, including having manual controls.

On March 15, director of Google’s self-driving car project Chris Urmson [testified](#) before the Senate Commerce Committee, advocating for a standardized federal system as a more practical solution for supervising the operation of autonomous vehicles across state lines. Urmson found support in the committee chairman John Thune who warned that Congress “must be careful not to stymie innovation because of a lack of imagination.” In opposition, Duke University robotics professor Mary Louise Cummings testified that there is “no question” someone would die from this technology and the focus should be on minimizing that risk.

Following the hearing, Urmson proposed a [rough outline](#) for a “federal fast track” regarding deployment of autonomous vehicles. The plan suggested that if companies pass federal safety standards, they should be eligible to submit an application to obtain permission for the sale of autonomous vehicles. The government could then add use limitations based on safety concerns, but would be obligated to review the application for sale in a “tight but realistic” time frame.

As of now, the U.S. Department of Transportation has plans to hold two public hearings before a [projected release date](#) for operational guidelines in July 2016. The first of the hearings will be in Washington, D.C. on April 8, and the second will be scheduled for a later date in California.