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What's in Your Cockpit? Big Brother in a Black Box



The Black Box, or EDR (event data recorder) is a device that General Motors began to install as early as 1974 as a component of a vehicle's air bag deployment system. Now a feature of most auto, SUV, and truck brands (and, more recently, motor homes), its purpose was originally to monitor the operation and effectiveness of air bags. By 2000, the EDR had been refined to include a variety of data that would reflect such functions as speed, degree of brake application, throttle position, safety-belt application, and airbag performance during the 5-6 seconds prior to a crash. EDRs can also measure the severity of a crash. Any measurements recorded before that are automatically erased. The devices used by auto manufacturers, however, do not record sound, unlike those in aircraft. Conversations between driver and passenger(s) either before or during a crash cannot be monitored.

Ostensibly, the information gleaned from EDRs is used to improve vehicle safety and crash protection, improve roadways, and reduce traffic fatalities. Data is used by vehicle manufacturers, emergency medical personnel, insurance companies, police, and other government agencies as requested. Special equipment is needed to access the data, which is often encrypted. Although NHTSA and vehicle manufacturers claim that the information recorded by EDRs is the property of the vehicle owner, whose permission must be obtained before it can be released, we wonder what choice you would have when the police or an insurance company ask to see it in the event of an accident. Realistically, none.

Initially, consumers were not informed of the presence of EDRs in their vehicles. Many are still in the dark about the EDR, even though GM now discloses its function in their owners' manuals. And, as of this writing, the technology is rapidly becoming more refined.

The following types of companies have been identified as potential future consumers of black box data: insurance companies, government agencies, human factors research companies, parents' groups, vehicle owners and transportation researchers. While some of these interests might have legitimate need to access some recorded data, basic privacy safeguards must be in place to protect the personal privacy of individuals riding in vehicles.

We, at RV Consumer Group, have been promoting RV safety for decades, urging manufacturers to improve the structural integrity of their units — particularly in motor homes — as well as the quality of materials and workmanship. Even though we no longer publish individual consumer accidents, we still receive far too many documents and photos of devastating (and often fatal) accidents caused by manufacturing deficiencies.

Therefore, we applaud any efforts by regulatory agencies to promote safety in all vehicles. However, we sincerely hope that the addition of black boxes to RVs will result in greater safety measures but not in more enhanced snooping features...because the privacy fulltimers still cherish may vanish, forever changing our RVing lifestyle.

Whether you are considering an RV for fulltiming, snowbirding, vacationing, or simply weekend getaways, be sure to check our [RV Ratings CD](#) before you buy.