

Alberta wants Ottawa to toughen drunk-driving laws

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As the province pushes ahead with legislation to increase sanctions on suspected drunk drivers, Alberta's justice minister says he wants to talk to Ottawa about potentially toughening federal laws.

Specifically, Verlyn Olson said he is interested in the possibility of lowering the .08 blood-alcohol threshold for laying a criminal charge on a driver. He said he needs to do

more research on the issue, but suggested .05 might be a more appropriate standard.

"Right now, .08 is the criminal standard and that's something I'd be interested in talking to the feds about," he said. "There is discussion that goes on about what is the right number, but I think it's accepted that .05 is the beginning of impairment. It's not there as an arbitrary number."

Olson noted that most western, European countries and Australian provinces use a .05

limit, Japan has a standard of .03, Sweden is .02. Hungary and the Czech Republic have a zero-alcohol policy.

Leila Moulder, president of the Edmonton chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, said she would support reviewing the .08 standard in Canada.

"I don't see why that would be a bad thing," she said. "At the .05 level, people are impaired. There is reaction time impairment, you are slower, you aren't quite as co-ordinated, your fine motor skills

aren't working at a top-notch level."

Moulder's organization is also supporting the province's proposed legislation, Bill 26, which would impose some of the strictest administrative penalties in the country.

For drivers who record a blood-alcohol level between .05 and .08, which is not a Criminal Code violation, the province allows police to impose a 24-hour licence suspension. The new legislation would increase that to an automatic three-day suspension

and a three-day vehicle seizure for a first offence. A seven-day vehicle seizure along with a 15-day suspension or 30-day suspension would be triggered for a second and third offence, respectively.

For drivers who blow over .08, they will get a criminal charge, and lose their licence until the charge is resolved by the courts. Those convicted will be required to equip their car with an interlock device, which measures a person's breath before starting the ignition.