Washington says computers can take the wheel

U.S. government agrees with Google's interpretation of what a driver is

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DETROIT — Computers that control cars of the future can be considered drivers just like humans, the United States federal government's highway safety agency has decided.

The redefinition of driver by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is an important break for Google, which is developing self-driving cars that get around without steering wheels, pedals — or even the need for a person to be inside.

Though treating a computer like a driver for regulatory purposes helps Google, its cars have miles to go before they get on the road in great numbers. While the safety agency agreed with Google's driver reinterpretation in a recent letter, it didn't allow other concessions and said numerous federal rules would have to be changed to permit the cars.

Google, a subsidiary of Alphabet Inc., is testing dozens of

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In a recent letter, the U.S. government agreed with Google's definition of who — or what — can be a driver, but rejected the company's claim that driverless cars wouldn't need gas pedals or brakes.

prototypes in California, Texas and Washington. The company has suggested they could be ready for the public in a few years.

In written requests over the past three months, Google asked the safety agency to interpret federal code in ways that would ease the path to market for its cars.

The agency agreed the car can be a driver but, in a Feb. 4 response posted on its website, also rejected the company's claim that the cars comply with many related regulations, including requirements for foot or hand brakes. Google said the requirement wasn't necessary

because the electronic driver can stop the cars. The government said regulations are clear and would have to be changed to allow that.

"In a number of instances, it may be possible for Google to show that certain (federal) standards are unnecessary for a particular vehicle design," Paul Hemmersbaugh, the highway traffic safety agency's chief counsel, wrote. "To date, however, Google has not made such a showing."

To put their cars on the road, automakers must self-certify that they meet federal safety standards and get approval from the traffic safety agency. Hemmersbaugh's letter encouraged Google to apply for exemptions to the standards. It also said for some requests, the agency will have to go through the cumbersome federal rule-making process to approve the cars.

Adding a note of skepticism for Google's design, in which human control would be limited to a start and stop button, Hemmersbaugh wrote the company might "wish to reconsider its view that

a pedal may never be needed in any circumstance, and that there is not a risk of harm associated with a pedal's absence."

Google spokesman Johnny Luu said the company had no comment beyond that it was reviewing the agency's response.

In January at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit, U.S. Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx said his department wants to get self-driving cars on the road quickly and will fast-track policies and possibly even waive regulations to do it.

Self-driving vehicles could eventually cut traffic deaths, decrease highway congestion and improve the environment, Foxx said. He encouraged automakers to come to the government with ideas about how to speed their development.

On Wednesday, Foxx called the government's reinterpretation of the word driver "significant," but added in a statement that "the burden remains on self-driving car manufacturers to prove that their vehicles meet rigorous federal safety standards."