



Cease and Desist Letter

May 22, 2003

Ms. Josephine Cooper
President
Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers
1401 H Street, Suite 900
Washington, DC 20005

Dear Ms. Cooper,

I am writing to ask that the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers cease and desist in its practice of blaming consumers for the manufacturers' poorly designed, unsafe sport utility vehicles and pickup trucks. Several weeks ago, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) published preliminary estimates for 2002 traffic fatalities, which showed that sport utility vehicle (SUV), pickup, and van rollover deaths account for more than half the total increase in traffic deaths for 2002.

In response to this appalling news, the Alliance blamed the victims whose lives were claimed by these disastrously unsafe SUVs and pickup trucks. Eron Shostek, your spokesman, claimed that "If every SUV driver wore their belt, we'd save 1000 lives a year." In the same breath, he also pointed out that alcohol-related deaths rose, overall, in 2002. Robert Strassburger repeated similar claims about belt use in *The Washington Post* on May 3, 2003.

This is just the "nut-behind-the-wheel" theory of the 1960s in updated clothes. It is far past time that the Alliance acknowledge its members' responsibility to protect public safety, instead of maliciously changing the subject. NHTSA statistics show that SUV drivers have the same safety belt-use rates as car drivers in fatal rollover crashes, and use alcohol while driving at a rate slightly less than car drivers in fatal crashes. The 100 percent belt-use rate referred to by Mr. Shostek has not been achieved by any country in the world (even Canada, which ranks first, has a belt-use rate of 90 percent).

While the Alliance attempts to divert attention from the poor design of SUVs by damning consumers for lack of belt use, your companies know thousands of lives could be saved, and injuries mitigated, by better SUV design. The key problem is that the poor design of SUVs and pickups makes them wobbly and rollover-prone. When they do roll over in a crash, people are harmed by the weak roofs which crush vulnerable heads and spines of passengers, seat belts that do not tighten in rollovers, and weak door locks which open portals for ejection.

Consumer groups, including Public Citizen, are avid supporters of increased belt usage. But the manufacturers' focus on safety belts as the only remedy is profoundly hypocritical given their installation of inadequate safety belts that too often fail in rollovers, their failure to install effective belt reminder systems, the lack of sensors for airbags and belts to provide crash protection in rollovers, and their repeated refusal to support federal legislation mandating primary safety belt enforcement.

Moreover, SUV and passenger car belt-use rates are virtually identical in fatal rollovers, yet these crashes account for 61 percent of SUV occupant deaths and only 24 percent of car occupant deaths. This critical information about a death toll unique to SUVs places an even greater duty on manufacturers to make vehicles that do not roll over easily, yet when NHTSA considered a minimum rollover propensity standard in the early 1990s, a measure which could have helped to prevent rollover crashes from occurring, industry pressure caused the agency to cave.

Further, Alliance members have done little voluntarily to address these hazards or improve the survivability of rollovers, instead going on record against safety standards to improve roof strength for SUVs and pickups. And now, as deaths mount, the Alliance has the nerve to blame the public for the recent rise in fatalities.

Further, the Alliance avoids explaining why 30 percent of those killed in SUVs were killed while wearing a safety belt, and many other belt wearers are injured catastrophically. Ms. Sandy Turner of Little Rock, Ark., is one of the numerous people living with the devastating consequences of these perilous designs. She, like too many others, was not drinking and was wearing her safety belt, but nonetheless suffered paraplegia-inducing injuries when her SUV rolled over. What do you say to her?

Stop deflecting blame and start designing vehicles to save lives.

Sincerely,

Joan Claybrook
President, Public Citizen