

TITLE 4 OF SAFETEA IS DATA-DRIVEN



Motor vehicle fatalities remain at an historic high and are the leading cause of death for Americans ages 2 to 34 – every 10 seconds an American is injured in a crash and someone is killed every 12 minutes.¹ The death toll on the road is equivalent to two fully loaded 747s (with 400 passengers) going down each week.

The problem is only getting worse. In 2002, highway deaths reached 42,815, the highest level since 1990. An astounding 82 percent of the increase in deaths between 2001 and 2002 occurred in rollover crashes. Rollover-prone SUVs and pickups, combined with vans, now are 49 percent of new passenger sales and 36 percent of registered motor vehicles – *a 70 percent increase between 1990 and 2000.*²

A recent federal study found that fatalities in rollover crashes in light trucks threaten to overwhelm *all other reductions in fatalities on the highway*, an astonishing fact when we consider that rates overall are improving: air bags are now a requirement for new vehicles and seat belt use keeps going up. NHTSA explained that “the increase in light truck occupant fatalities accounts for the continued high level of overall occupant fatalities, *having offset the decline in traffic deaths of passenger car occupants.*”³

Each part of Title 4 – rollover prevention and survivability safeguards, ejection prevention measures, and vehicle compatibility measures, child safety, and 15-passenger vans – targets areas where cost-effective, feasible remedies are currently available to save lives.

Moreover, in many areas the hazards are inter-related— for example, rollover crashes involve interactions among vehicle factors such as rollover stability, ejection, side impact air bags, safety belt pretensioners, and door locks and latches. For that reason, NHTSA should be asked to examine problems as a whole, and to address, at the same time, all of the design and technology issues which can improve the survivability of rollover crashes. A comprehensive approach is also more cost-effective for manufacturers, as any re-design can be phased in at the same time over the life of the model cycles.

In short, Title 4’s comprehensive approach will produce the most cost-effective and scientifically sound new safety standards.

Congressional Mandates Are Appropriate

The Administration’s plan for reviewing safety standards outside of its “priority areas” is for a cyclical, 7-year review. While a more regular review of standards is a good idea (some have been on the books for more than thirty years!), such an approach is hardly “data-driven.”

The number of lives that would be saved by Title 4 dwarfs the still-tragic number of people killed in the Ford-Firestone tragedy, yet NHTSA’s Administrator, Dr. Jeffrey Runge, suggested at a Mar. 18, 2004, hearing in the House of Representatives that asking NHTSA to act in a timely way in these areas is unreasonable. In response to questions, Dr. Runge also said that, in contrast, “[l]egislative mandates are important when we have a crisis situation like in the TREAD [Act].”

Fact: Between 2000, when the TREAD Act was passed, and 2002, 150 times that many people were killed in the U.S. in rollovers alone.

This situation is a crisis.

Sources

¹ See United States General Accounting Office, “Research Continues on a Variety of Factors That Contribute to Motor Vehicle Crashes,” GAO-03-436 (Mar. 2003).

² U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, “Light-Duty Automotive Technology and Fuel Economy Trends: 1975 Through 2003,” EPA420-R03-006, April 2003.

³ National Center for Statistics and Analysis (NCSA), *Characteristics of Fatal Rollover Crashes*, DOT HS 809 438, at 22 (Apr. 2002), at 13 (emphasis added).