

TIRE SAFETY STANDARDS

Tire Safety Performance Requirements Still Not Comprehensive

In the 1966 law, the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act, the U.S. Secretary of Transportation was required to prescribe a uniform quality grading system for motor vehicle tires that applied only to passenger car tires. This rating program, the Uniform Tire Quality Grading Standards (UTQGS), is for consumer information purposes only and does not establish any safety performance requirements for tire manufacturers to meet. Subsequently, tire safety performance standards were issued but were inadequate in many areas, yet were left essentially unchanged by the agency for decades.

In 2000, Congress passed the Transportation Recall Enhancement, Accountability, and Documentation Act (TREAD) that directed NHTSA to adopt a new regulation improving the safety performance of passenger vehicle tires in several critical areas. Congress found that the existing tire standards were not sufficiently stringent to prevent tire failure, especially when tires are underinflated. However, the agency final rule adopted in response to the TREAD Act did not establish standards in all the areas necessary to have comprehensive federal regulations governing in-service tire safety performance, although they did apply to light trucks up to 10,000 lbs. gross vehicle weight.

Nov. 1970	NHTSA adopts basic tire standards. Criteria for bead unseating and other requirements are based on bias-ply tires.
July 1978	NHTSA adopts a revised and improved UTQGS.
June 1994	NHTSA issues notice with request for comments on potential substitution of a rolling resistance rating in lieu of the current temperature rating, and the adoption of a super-traction rating of "AA." Safety organizations oppose these tentative proposals.
July 1995	NHTSA publishes notice of proposed rulemaking to adopt a "super-traction" rating of "AA" and to replace the current temperature resistance grading system with a rolling resistance/fuel economy grade. Safety organizations strongly oppose both proposals, pointing out that the agency was not requiring a uniform improvement in the actual grading criteria for traction and that a rolling resistance standard could produce tires prone to skidding in wet weather and having poor high temperature resistance. The agency does not respond to safety community objections and arguments that the agency is changing the UTQGS without actually improving the safety performance of tires.

- July 1995 NHTSA holds a public meeting on the regulatory proposal. Safety representatives make a presentation strongly opposing the UTQGS changes.
- Sept. 1996 NHTSA issues a final rule adopting a super-traction grade of “AA,” despite safety organization arguments that the regulatory change does not actually require tire manufacturers to change the current traction quality of their products.
- 1998-1999 Rubber and tire manufacturers approach NHTSA with proposal for a globally harmonized tire standard to simplify testing and compliance for certifying tires sold in the U.S.
- Nov. 1999 NHTSA expresses concerns at a public meeting of the European Economic Community Working Group on brakes and running gears that the proposed criteria for the “Global Tire Standard 2000” (GRS 2000) are too weak and inadequate. NHTSA also acknowledges at the meeting that all the agency’s tire standards are outdated and in need of basic changes. Although radial tires have displaced bias ply tires, the existing standards were written for the bias ply tires.
- 1995-2000 Tread separations and resulting crashes increase among Bridgestone/Firestone tires mounted on Ford Explorers, causing hundreds of deaths and injuries in rollover crashes that are unknown to the public and not evaluated by NHTSA.
- Aug. 2000 Following a NHTSA investigation — sparked by two stories by KHOU TV in Houston, TX — and the disclosure that Ford recalled some tires in Saudi Arabia, Ford and Firestone conduct a “voluntary” recall of 6.5 million tires used on Explorers for tread separation.
- Nov. 2000 Congress enacts the Tire Recall Enhancement, Accountability, and Documentation (TREAD) Act that requires NHTSA to upgrade tire performance standards and tire consumer information programs, among other issues.
- Nov. 2002 NHTSA establishes a standard for light vehicle tires, FMVSS No. 139, *New Pneumatic Tires for Light Vehicles*, to improve the information readily available to consumers about their vehicles’ tires, particularly tire labeling, effective Sept. 2003.
- Mar. 2002 NHTSA publishes a notice of proposed rulemaking to upgrade several existing standards and also to establish new standards in critical tire safety areas not previously addressed in the agency’s tire safety requirements.

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NHTSA issues final rule to improve tire safety, concentrating particularly on tire endurance and speed performance to reduce failure and extends the standard to tires used by light trucks and vans. However, the agency leaves major areas of the proposed standard unfinished including reducing failure from tire impacts with road hazards, improving tire resistance to unbeading, and controlling tire failure because of gradual deterioration during tire service life. The agency also has not addressed the issue of tire wet weather anti-skidding performance, an issue specifically directed by Congress in separate legislation.