

Automotive News World Congress
“Meeting the Safety Challenge”

Jeffrey W. Runge, MD, Administrator
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
January 14, 2003

- Thanks for the introductions to Keith Crain, *Automotive News* Publisher
- I bring you greetings from my bosses, President Bush and Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta. President Bush and Secretary Mineta have made it clear that their # 1 transportation priorities are safety and security.
- As a former Commerce Secretary, Secretary Mineta understands the essential role the auto industry plays in the American and international economies. These are difficult and uncertain times for our economy and our nation.
- Yet while we strive to meet economic challenges we cannot shrink from the challenge of safety. While we make extraordinary efforts to protect our nation and our people, let us also make extraordinary progress in creating safe vehicles that will result in dramatic improvements in the safety of highway travel.
- Although we are making progress, in 2001, 42,116 people lost their lives in highway crashes, and more than 3 million people were injured.
- In addition to these tragic human losses, the annual economic cost is staggering - over \$230 billion.
- President Bush always says that personal responsibility and the choices that people make are the most critical elements in the quality of our lives.
- This is why we spend about half of our budget at NHTSA on the behavioral side of the safety issue. The importance of personal responsibility is no more significant than in the realm of safety belt use and impaired driving.
- Efforts to increase safety belt use have been showing results, and belt use has been rising. Across the country belt use reached 75% in 2002, an all-time high.
- But at the same time this also means that about 25% of Americans still are not meeting their personal responsibility to buckle up.
- Our next goal is to reach 78% belt use by the end of 2003, and while this is achievable, reaching the 90% and higher use levels that some countries have attained will be very challenging.
- The stakes are high: over 9,000 fatalities and over 140,000 people injured and more than \$26 billion in costs incurred each year because of failure to use safety belts.

- The severity of more than 6,000 serious injuries would be reduced with every 1 percentage point increase in safety belt use. Belt use at 90% would save an estimated 6,600 lives each year.
- Until belt use is up into the 90% range, we will continue to be concerned about the unbelted occupant. Fortunately, new technologies may make it possible to better protect belted as well as unbelted occupants.
- Those manufacturers that have committed to changing design features to encourage belt use, such as the belt minder system or improving belt fit, are showing great leadership. It demonstrates a strong commitment to safety. I ask that you not back off from this commitment.
- Impaired driving is another major focus for NHTSA. After a steady decline in the 80's and early 90's in alcohol related highway deaths, this progress leveled off in the past few years and since then the number killed has remained pretty flat.
- For this reason, in December I launched the beginning of a yearlong effort focused on what we know prevents impaired driving – highly visible detection, arrest and prosecution.
- I asked staff to evaluate all the possible countermeasures we might undertake, to determine which would yield the greatest benefits in saving lives.
- This shows the result: reducing alcohol-impaired driving and increasing safety belt use offer the greatest gains.
- While improvements in these two areas can contribute significantly to reducing the number of lives lost on the highway, other means, such as reducing rollover propensity, improving crash characteristics and installing better occupant protection systems in new vehicles will also make a big difference.
- While individuals must demonstrate safe personal behavior on the highway, industry has a responsibility to ensure the safety of new technologies that are installed in vehicles.
- I recognize the market pressure to add gizmos and gadgets to new vehicles, some for safety, even more for customer convenience and appeal, but before you deploy these systems I want to remind you: you have a fundamental responsibility to assess their hazard potential.
- This is true whether you are here today representing original equipment manufacturers, after market suppliers or if you manufacture the vehicle itself.
- We cannot regulate fast enough to keep up with technological advances, nor would we want to. This Administration will always prefer voluntary brilliance to enforced compliance.

- Nowhere is this more important than in two of our top priority vehicle safety areas: vehicle compatibility and rollover prevention and protection. These 2 issues must be addressed because they account for a large and growing share of the safety problem.
- In August, 2002 NHTSA published for public comment a four-year *Vehicle Safety Rulemaking Priorities* plan. These two topics were identified in the draft plan, along with many others.
- In addition to considering the public comments submitted in response to the plan, we are currently taking a hard look at the research support that will be needed for implementation. A final version of the plan will be published in 2003.
- The growing popularity of light trucks, vans, and sport utility vehicles over the past 10 years has changed the marketplace as well as the safety picture. About half of all new vehicle sales today are in this category.
- There are now over 76 million of these vehicles on the road, or about 35 percent of all registered vehicles in the U.S.
- There are significant differences in the fatality risk by vehicle type in crashes among different vehicle types. Passenger cars experience the greatest risk in frontal and side impacts.
- In frontal crashes there are more than 6 passenger car driver fatalities for every driver who is killed in vans or pickups when these types of vehicles collide. The ratio for car/SUV collisions is over 4 times.
- These ratios are even more dramatic in side impacts. There are 26 fatalities among passenger car drivers when their car is hit near-side by a pick up truck, and 16 deaths when they are hit near-side by an SUV.
- At NHTSA we appointed Integrated Project Teams to address our top priorities. Currently the compatibility team is evaluating the problem of vehicle aggressiveness and incompatibility in multi-vehicle crashes.
- The problem is being examined through crash statistics and crash test data to identify crash causation factors and possible solutions.
- The strategies recommended through the work of this and the other teams will be published in the Federal Register for public comment.
- As with compatibility, the increasing problem with vehicle rollovers has moved this issue to the small group of top agency priorities
- There are about 10,000 fatalities in all rollover crashes each year. Rollover crashes represent 3% of all collisions and yet account for 32% of occupant fatalities.

- The growing share of LTVs in the fleet creates new challenges with the problem of rollover crashes. Last year, fatalities in single vehicle rollovers increased 2.3%. They now account for 8,400 fatalities with pick up trucks accounting for the largest increase.
- Rollover propensity for SUV's and pickups is far greater than for passenger cars. This slide shows that the rollover occupant fatality rate per 100,000 registered SUVs about 3 times higher than it is for passenger cars.
- This slide further illustrates what we saw in the last slide. Rollover fatalities represent over 60 percent of SUV fatalities versus 22 percent for passenger cars.
- The share for pickups is twice as large as for passenger cars.
- These higher proportions are due to the higher propensity of these vehicles to rollover combined with occupant ejections and partial ejections due to non-use of safety belts.
- This trend is also reflected in the data on serious injuries. 46% of SUV serious injuries take place in rollover crashes vs. 16% of the total for passenger cars.
- Despite the increased general use of safety belts, 72 percent of occupants who die in rollover crashes are not belted. Our research shows that pick up truck drivers have the lowest belt use.
- Among restrained drivers there is a very low incidence of ejection. The safest place to be in a rollover is completely inside the vehicle.
- A major contributor to the particularly lethal nature of rollover crashes is the potential for ejection.
- Until driver behavior changes in this country and we attain 90 percent belt use or more, we will need to continue to target solutions to prevent occupant ejection in rollover crashes.
- While we are looking into possible improvements in occupant protection under the roof crush standard, the data clearly show that prevention of the rollover in the first place and retaining occupants within the vehicle will produce the greatest safety benefits.
- NHTSA has been conducting tests to determine the effectiveness of side curtains using the Dynamic Rollover Fixture (DRF).
- In our limited testing so far, we have found side curtains to be effective in mitigating complete ejections. There appear to be some problems in effectively mitigating partial ejections.
- As I indicated recently in Germany at the air bag symposium, we anticipate that our work will lead in the near future to rulemaking proposals, including a possible performance requirement for these systems for vehicles.

- It is vital that industry address some baseline standard requirements for these systems, including proper evaluation of rollover standards.
- I am asking for industry to get together through a technical working group to establish the baseline. I understand this may already be underway for compatibility using the Side Airbag Working Group model. The use of technologies to increase belt use needs to be a vital component of this work.
- It is in the best interests of the industry and the public that this move forward collaboratively.
- All of these efforts that I have talked about today come together in contributing to the nation's goal of reducing overall highway deaths by 2008. This will be very challenging to meet.
- However, I have visited numerous manufacturers in the United States, Europe and Japan during the past year and their commitments to safety have impressed me.
- Most have committed to installing seat belt reminders in their vehicles. Many are working on rollover sensing technologies and side curtains. They are also seeking solutions to vehicle compatibility problems.
- In addition to the government-initiated approaches I mentioned earlier, we are also relying on the auto industry to meet its safety challenges and responsibilities, even under today's demanding economic circumstances.
- I appreciate having the opportunity to address this meeting.