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STATEMENT BY CLAUDE S. BRINEGAR, SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION, BEFORE
THE SENATE COMMERCE COMMITTEE REGARDING MOTOR VEHICLE SAFETY, THURSDAY,
MARCH 21, 1974.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I am pleased to have this opportunity to appear before the Committee today to discuss the Department's efforts to reduce motor vehicle deaths and injuries.

Please let me assure you that I take our safety mission very seriously. While we are working on safety programs across all modes, the motor vehicle must, of course, be given a very high priority in terms of level of effort. Of the approximately 60,000 killed in all transportation accidents in this country in 1973, some 56,500 resulted from automobile accidents.

Progress is being made. The fatality rate in terms of deaths per hundred million miles driven has fallen by 25 percent since 1966, with the rate in 1973 of 4.3 the lowest on record. Most encouraging, the total number of traffic deaths in 1973 was down 500 from the prior year.

These gains are, of course, due to a number of factors, including slower speeds and reduced driving resulting from the fuel shortage, and it is difficult to pinpoint which action has produced which result. But we do know that, overall, we are making progress.

Our programs fall into three types:

First, we have motor vehicle safety standards issued by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. These standards are designed to protect occupants by improving the safety of the vehicle. These actions are directed at correcting specific design or other flaws (as in the windshield or brakes or fuel tank), adding worthy safety equipment (as in seat belts or the air cushion), or through changes in the vehicle's structural characteristics (as in an energy absorbing body and frame). Forty-five of these standards have been issued and 18 of them are undergoing revision. In addition, 7 new standards have been proposed. In setting these standards -- and 16 have been issued, revised, or proposed while I have been Secretary -- we are guided by the language of the 1966 Motor Vehicle Safety Act, which says: "The Secretary shall establish by order appropriate Federal motor vehicle safety standards. Each such Federal motor vehicle safety standard shall be practicable, shall meet the need for motor vehicle safety, and shall be stated in objective terms." I should add that NHTSA also conducts research and development work on new safety concepts, administers an auto safety-defect recall program, and carries out compliance testing of new automobiles.

Second, we have numerous programs, mostly in cooperation with the safety agencies in the states, to improve the drivers' abilities to either avoid an accident or to take steps, such as wearing of seat belts, to survive one. Since something in the order of 80 percent of all automobile accidents are the result of driver error -- over half

of which occur while under the influence of alcohol -- we clearly cannot turn our back on this element of the safety equation, no matter how discouraging it may be. A major thrust of this program is to keep chronic drunk drivers off the road and to convince social drinkers of the foolishness of driving after drinking. In total, NHTSA administers 15 safety standards that relate to this Federal-state joint effort to improve driver performance.

Third, we have a variety of programs administered by the Federal Highway Administration directed at improving the safety of the Nation's highway system. The 1973 Federal-Aid Highway Act specifically established six such new programs (for example, for rail grade crossings, high-hazard obstacle removals, and the like).

Let me conclude by observing that I have devoted a great deal of personal effort to these programs over the past 14 months, and that I plan to continue to do so in the months ahead. I have pressed NHTSA hard to show that its programs are not only well-conceived, but also well executed. I have pressed to make sure we reasonably well know the consequences of our proposals and our actions.

I have also endeavored to avoid overstatements and hasty judgments. I recognize that some of these matters can be seen differently, and I am always willing to discuss such differences. But to the extent that I have the statutory responsibility for making these decisions, I have made them -- and will continue to make them -- in the context of balancing all aspects of the public interest.

And now, either I or my associates would be pleased to try to answer your specific questions.

