

feed

STATEMENT OF DIANE K. STEED, ADMINISTRATOR,
NATIONAL HIGHWAY TRAFFIC SAFETY ADMINISTRATION,
BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE AND TRANSPORTATION,
CONCERNING THE ACTIVITIES OF THE AGENCY

February 21, 1985

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee:

I am pleased to appear today to testify on the activities of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Much has happened in highway safety since I appeared before you in September 1984, and I am glad to have this opportunity to bring you up to date.

First, I want to report that the fatality rate in 1984 declined to an all-time low of 2.55 deaths per hundred million vehicle miles travelled. In 1984, the combined effects of a variety of interrelated factors --alcohol programs, improved vehicles, higher levels of belt use, better roads --was almost enough to overcome the effects of a 4.5 percent surge in vehicle miles travelled during the year. Our final data is not yet in, but we estimate that 43,800 persons died in highway crashes during 1984, an increase over the 42,600 who died in 1983, but well below the number who would have died if safety efforts had not moved ahead. This number shows progress, but it also shows how far we have to go.

In September I reported dramatic progress in the areas of alcohol safety and occupant protection. Today those items remain at the top of my agency's agenda. In the area of alcohol, we are beginning to see evidence of a real decline in the incidence of alcohol-related fatalities. For 1980, our data indicated that about 50 percent of fatally injured drivers were legally intoxicated. Our data for the first 9 months of 1984 suggest that the percentage of intoxicated drivers in fatal accidents has declined to 45 percent. In the area of occupant restraints, the upward movement in belt use now seems to be well established. Our roadside observations indicate that the use rate among drivers has climbed above 15 percent, an increase confirmed by our accident investigations. New York, with its belt use law which went into effect January 1, has experienced a dramatic increase in belt usage from 16 percent to an estimated 63-76 percent, based on preliminary data. We believe that these trends in alcohol involvement and belt use account for a part of the decline in the highway fatality rate. I believe that new developments in both areas will produce even more pronounced improvements during the coming year.

ALCOHOL PROGRAMS

I will turn first to the alcohol safety program. During the last two sessions of Congress, this Committee reported two major bills which were enacted into law to deter drunk driving. The first, enacted in 1982, established the Section 408 alcohol safety incentive grant program. Under this program, 16 States have now qualified for a basic grant, and

13 of those States have farther qualified for a supplementary grant. A number of other States have enacted legislation satisfying several of the grant criteria and are working to satisfy the remaining criteria. Several of the qualifying States have already shown remarkable progress. One of the most notable examples is North Dakota, which achieved a 44 percent reduction in alcohol-related fatalities during the 12 months ending June 30, 1984, compared to the preceding 12 months. We are working with the qualifying States to implement their programs and expect to see significant reductions in alcohol involvement as a result of these programs.

The second bill, enacted last summer, directs the Secretary of Transportation to withhold 5 percent of the fiscal year 1987 Federal-aid highway funds and 10 percent of fiscal year 1988 funds from any State that permits the purchase or public possession of alcohol by persons under the age of 21. After the law was enacted, Massachusetts raised its minimum drinking age to 21. I am pleased to report that the Georgia and Virginia legislatures have passed 21 drinking age bills. Upon the Governors' signatures, these will become the 25th and 26th States to adopt 21 as the minimum drinking age. Age-21 bills have been introduced in 18 other States. Although the legislation was defeated in Wyoming, we are encouraged to see that age-21 bills have passed the Senates of Mississippi and Montana. We believe there is a good chance of passage in other States as well. We have developed a notice of proposed rulemaking, which we hope to publish in the near future, to assist the States in adopting drinking age legislation.

I believe that this guidance will facilitate the enactment of age-21 drinking laws in additional States. It will thereby help reduce the tragic loss of lives resulting from the involvement of young drivers in alcohol-related accidents, while also helping to assure the continued availability of Federal-aid highway funds to the States.

SAFETY BELTS

After years of perseverance and hard work, safety advocates in the States are succeeding in passing laws to require the use of safety belts. At the time of the September hearing, New York had become the first State to enact a mandatory use law. I am very pleased to report that New Jersey and Illinois have now joined New York.

During the 1985 legislative sessions, bills to require safety belt use have been introduced in 29 States and are expected to be considered in several others. A belt use bill has already passed the Michigan Senate and is given a good chance of final passage. Safety belt legislation also passed one house in both the Maryland and Virginia legislatures, which should help lay the groundwork for renewed efforts in those States next year. The prospects in several other States are also favorable for serious consideration of belt use laws.

This year, we believe the momentum is shifting in favor of enacting State belt use laws. As the clear life-saving results from the States become known, we expect that public support for belt use laws will

increase even further. The plain fact is that safety belts save lives. In New York alone, millions of motorists will be buckling up, many for the first time. Thousands of persons will now be wearing belts when crashes occur, and many will be spared death or serious injury because of the belts. The statistics will speak for themselves, and the doubters will become believers.

As I noted earlier, preliminary data from New York after the belt use law went into full effect on January 1, 1985, suggests that from 63 to 76 percent of motorists are buckling their belts, up from 16 percent in early October. We have worked intensively with New York in the development of the public information and education program to help gain public acceptance of the new law. This tremendous increase over prior usage levels supports our belief that safety belt use laws will produce the same life-saving benefit in America that they have provided in other countries.

We are doing our utmost to ensure that information about the benefits of safety belts is available to a wide spectrum of individuals and organizations in each State. We have every hope that 1985 and 1986 will be breakthrough years for safety belt legislation.

To enable our efforts to move ahead, we are seeking full funding for the \$20 million occupant protection program in fiscal years 1985 and 1986. We have developed a National Safety Belt Education Program for which these funds would be used. A major objective of this program is to lay

a foundation which will result in belt use and usage laws becoming more acceptable to policy makers and the public. Despite the program's current funding limitations we have made substantial progress. We have made presentations at governors' conferences, State and national conferences of legislators, before newspaper editorial boards throughout the country, on radio and television news programs and talk shows, and have testified, when requested, before State legislatures. We have sponsored two conferences for State legislators on occupant protection. We have responded to numerous requests for information from legislators and the public. All fifty States have been contacted and offered technical and other assistance to the extent that our limited funding permits.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 208 DECISION

Your letter of invitation asked for a report on the implementation of the Secretary's decision on Motor Vehicle Safety Standard No. 208, Occupant Crash Protection. Our efforts to encourage safety belt usage are a part of this implementation process, because we believe it is vital to the safety of the motoring public to move ahead with these measures that will bring about the most immediate reductions of traffic on deaths and injuries. At the same time, we are proceeding with the further rulemaking activity necessary to implement fully the automatic protection features of the standard, and we plan to issue notices soon

on the test procedures of the standard, on the use of the Hybrid III test dummy, on the comfort and convenience of restraints, and on the petitions for reconsideration of the Secretary's decision.

Our work on automatic restraints is also continuing. On February 7, Secretary Dole accepted delivery of the first Ford Tempos equipped with air bags for the GSA fleet. These represent the first installment of a 5,000-car air bag equipped fleet for Federal service. Others will be introduced into corporate fleets. The Travelers Insurance Company, in fact, has just announced the purchase of 600 of these cars. We are continuing our examination of retrofitted air bags in police fleets around the country. The results so far have been quite good. Our examination of two different types of retrofitted air bags may demonstrate the practicability of these devices in the marketplace.

These activities, together with other agency initiatives in the areas of public information and education, marketing, and evaluation are more fully described in the Agency's Program Plan for Automatic Protection. Among the activities described in the plan are the development of new informational brochures on automatic restraints and the preparation of a comprehensive bibliography to be available through our Hotline.

BUMPERS

Another subject mentioned in your letter concerns the bumper rulemaking. In a long-awaited decision, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit recently upheld the agency's decision to lower the bumper impact speeds from 5 to 2.5 miles per hour. Notwithstanding the Court's decision, we are continuing our efforts to evaluate the relative performance of 5 mph bumpers and lower-speed bumpers in real world conditions.

Under the Motor Vehicle Information and Cost Savings Act, the essential inquiry is not whether the 5 mph bumper withstands low speed impacts better than the 2.5 mph bumper -- we know it does -- but whether the 2.5 mph bumper produces cost savings to the average consumer in the real world. We continue to believe that the 5 mph bumper is not cost-beneficial for the vast majority of consumers who will never actually experience impacts between 2.5 and 5 mph. These consumers will enjoy the maximum feasible reduction of costs with the standard set at 2.5 mph. However, some of those consumers may prefer to buy a car equipped with 5 mph bumpers, and we are pleased that the market is responding to that demand by offering a wide choice of cars with 5 mph bumpers. It was our careful consideration of this statutorily mandated balancing test that led us to set the bumper standard at 2.5 mph in 1982.

In parallel with our work on the bumper standard, we are continuing work to provide consumers with information on bumpers. We have just completed a second series of tests to measure bumper performance, involving 15 vehicles in low speed impacts, and we are collecting information from insurers on the real world accident experience of these vehicles in hopes of validating our tests.

SIDE IMPACT PROTECTION

Another topic mentioned in your letter is the protection of vehicle occupants from side impacts. We have developed and tested a dummy to measure chest accelerations in side impacts, a deformable moving barrier for dynamic side impacts, and an index for measuring thoracic trauma. The problems of head injury and ejection are further from resolution, with much research remaining to be done.

SPLASH AND SPRAY

In response to your final area of inquiry, a notice of proposed rulemaking regarding the splash and spray characteristics of large trucks, as required by the Surface Transportation Assistance Act of 1982 is pending at the Office of Management and Budget. The notice will propose specifications to reduce the volume of water thrown up by these

trucks on wet roads. I know that the Committee has been waiting for this proposal for some time. I hope that we can move forward on this complex rulemaking shortly.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared remarks. If you have questions, I would be glad to answer them at this time.