

STATEMENT OF DIANE K. STEED
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BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
ON VEHICLE SAFETY ISSUES

October 1, 1986

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. I am pleased to appear before you today to discuss the vehicle safety issues you have asked us to address. With me at the witness table are Barry Felrice, our Associate Administrator for Rulemaking, George Reagle, our Associate Administrator for Traffic Safety programs, and Erika Jones, our Chief Counsel.

Before I discuss these issues, I would like to share with you some very good news about highway safety. For 1985, our preliminary data show that the Nation's fatality rate fell to an all-time low of 2.48 deaths per hundred million miles traveled. The number of people who died in traffic crashes decreased to about 43,795 in 1985 from 44,257 in 1984. That decrease was in the face of a 2.8 percent increase in miles traveled during the year. The record of declining traffic fatalities in five of the last six years is a record in which all of us can take great pride.

The combination of several interrelated factors -- strengthened efforts to fight drunk driving, better roads, improved vehicles, and substantially higher levels of safety belt and child safety seat use -- have resulted in a continued decrease in both the rate and the total number of fatalities on the Nation's highways.

I will now turn to the specific subjects which your letter invites us to address.

THE FIGHT AGAINST DRUNK DRIVING

In the fight against drunk driving, we are continuing to experience substantial success. Between 1980 and 1985, the number of fatally-injured drivers who were intoxicated at the time of their crashes dropped about 26 percent -- an unprecedented decline. This decline is due to the cumulative effects of greater public awareness, tougher state laws, stricter enforcement, and a decline in the population of young drivers legally allowed to drink.

With regard to age-21 laws, 20 states have enacted such laws since the National Minimum Drinking Age law passed in 1984. We have advised a total of 41 states that their laws conform to the Federal law. We believe that the number of alcohol-related deaths among young drivers will decline as the age-21 laws enacted since the passage of the Federal law go into effect, and will decline even further as additional states raise their drinking ages. In a study completed last fall, we estimated that about 700 lives were saved in 1984 by minimum drinking ages above 18 and that about 400 additional lives could have been saved that year by a uniform drinking age of 21.

LIGHT TRUCK SAFETY

The question of light truck safety has grown in significance as these vehicles have increased in numbers and diversity. Between 1971 and 1985, their market share almost doubled -- from 15 percent of light duty vehicles sales to 29 percent -- and is continuing to grow. Much of this increase is in vehicles such as compact pickups and multipurpose passenger vehicles, which are often used for recreation and family transportation as well as for work. Compact pickups and the new minivans which many families are purchasing in place of station wagons now account for more than 50 percent of light truck sales, up from only 10 percent in 1977.

Our Fatal Accident Reporting System (FARS) recorded 6,887 people killed in light trucks in 1985 compared to 22,963 killed in passenger cars. Expressed as a fatality rate per hundred thousand registered vehicles, the rate for all light trucks in 1985 was 20.2, just about the same as the rate for all passenger cars.

At this moment we are engaged in a review of the whole issue of light truck safety, in which we are focusing on the characteristics of the individual types of light trucks. Our preliminary assessment is that there is a wide range of performance among light trucks. Some, such as the vans, appear to have a lower fatality rate than passenger cars, while others, such as compact pickups, have a higher rate.

Our first concern is with those vehicles that show higher fatality rates. Our initial review of crashes involving compact pickups suggests that these vehicles are involved in a disproportionate number of rollovers and that a significant percentage of fatalities in both rollovers and frontal crashes involve occupants who are ejected. If this initial finding is supported by subsequent analysis, it would point toward a need for better vehicle stability and for increased usage of restraints or other means of reducing occupant ejection.

We have already begun efforts to address both stability and restraints. Beginning this fall we will be conducting research on the braking stability of light trucks in an effort to examine means of improving their stability during emergency maneuvers. We have also begun a rulemaking action to require the dynamic testing of safety belts in light trucks, which we expect to complete by the end of the year.

At the direction of the House Appropriations Committee, we are developing our review of light trucks into a report to Congress that will assess the safety problems associated with light trucks, evaluate improvements to enhance their safety, estimate the costs and benefits of these improvements, and set a schedule for any appropriate regulatory actions. As part of our report, we will analyze crash data to identify safety problems with any type of light truck and conduct engineering analyses of the vehicle structures and restraint characteristics of these vehicles. The report is due by April 1987, at which time we will be able to make a more comprehensive statement on light truck safety.

REAR SEAT SAFETY BELTS

Your letter of invitation expressed concern about the design of safety belts in the rear seat. The National Transportation Safety Board highlighted this issue in a study released last month. You have urged Secretary Dole to adopt the recommendations of the Board by requiring the installation of lap/shoulder belts in the rear seat and by giving consumers information about how to retrofit their vehicles with these belts.

In recent months, we have been talking with vehicle manufacturers to encourage them voluntarily to install lap/shoulder belts in the rear seats of passenger cars. In part as a result of these discussions, General Motors recently announced that it would include such belts as standard equipment on selected 1987 models and on all passenger cars during 1988 - 1989. NHTSA has also granted a recent petition for rulemaking asking us to require the installation of such rear seat belts and we plan to issue a notice on this petition shortly.

In a rule issued last year, we acted to provide consumers with information that we believe should encourage the retrofitting of lap/shoulder belts in the rear seat. In this rule we adopted a requirement that manufacturers provide information in their owner's manuals about the availability of lap/shoulder belt anchorages in the rear seat.

While I am confident that our actions on rear seat lap/shoulder belts will ensure the wider availability of these belts, I am concerned that the Safety Board's report may have seriously misled and confused the public. The Safety Board's study was based on an extremely limited number of frontal crashes, which do not give a true picture of overall safety belt performance. NHTSA and other organizations have conducted large-scale studies of rear seat lap belts, and our firm conclusion is that the public is better off wearing rear seat lap belts than traveling unbelted. Our rulemaking on the subject of lap/shoulder belts for the rear seats will examine whether the safety of rear seat occupants can be further enhanced by these belts.

PASSIVE RESTRAINTS

In the passive restraint area, you expressed concern that the recent Ford petition to permit the use of a driver-side air bag system beyond the automatic restraint phase-in period may delay the introduction of full front air bag systems. We are carefully evaluating all the safety effects of Ford's petition and we expect to issue a decision on the petition shortly.

This is my first opportunity to call attention to the beginning of the phase-in period for passive restraints. Cars equipped with passive restraints are now entering the showrooms. When consumers have the opportunity to see the new systems, including air bags and new automatic

belts such as Ford's, we think that the market demand will ensure that passive restraints are here to stay. We are doing everything we can to ensure that auto dealers are taking affirmative steps to inform the public about these restraints. In a speech to the National Automobile Dealers Association last month, I emphasized that the public has become much more interested in safety and that they, the dealers, have a great opportunity to promote this interest through informing their customers of the restraint options available to them. The response from the dealers, I am pleased to say, was overwhelmingly positive. I believe this represents a significant change in attitude that will be reflected in the sales of occupant restraints of all kinds -- air bags as well as automatic safety belts. As you know, we are also providing the public with new information about passive restraints. We have already distributed some 150,000 copies of two new pamphlets on passive restraints and 350,000 copies of a pamphlet showing parents how to use child safety seats with the new restraints.

The momentum for safety belt use laws has grown steadily. Since Secretary Dole's July 1984 occupant protection decision, 26 states and the District of Columbia have enacted mandatory use laws. We expect this number to continue to increase. We have seen the effects in increased belt usage. In our 19-city survey, the June 1986 results show that in the eight cities with safety belt laws in effect, 49 percent of the drivers were buckled up. The highest cities, Dallas and Houston, reported usage rates of 70 percent. The reports on the safety effects of

these laws are very encouraging. In the eight states that had belt use laws during at least three months of 1985, front seat occupant fatalities in passenger vehicles were reduced an average of seven percent during the months that the laws were in effect, compared to the corresponding months of 1984. For Illinois, fatalities during the last six months of 1985 were down 14 percent compared to the five-year average for those months.

The Secretary's occupant crash protection decision is also working to promote the availability of automatic restraint systems. Beginning this fall, all manufacturers will begin installing automatic restraints in 10 percent of their cars, resulting in a growing public awareness of automatic restraints. The goal of the Secretary's occupant crash protection decision has always been the same as this Committee's: to save as many lives as possible, as quickly as possible. For the first time we are able to measure the effects of the occupant protection standard by lives saved, not just by words on paper.

This concludes my statement. I will be glad to try to answer any questions you may have.