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BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND POWER
OF THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
REGARDING
FUEL ECONOMY

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

It is a pleasure to appear before you today to discuss automotive fuel economy and the issues presented by H.R. 5560.

The Administration has strongly opposed the Senate counterpart to this bill, arguing that it would decrease highway safety, harm U.S. competitiveness, and impose high costs on new car and truck buyers. We fully support the Administration's view on each of these points, but as the administrator of an agency whose principal mission is safety I want to highlight the threat the bill poses for highway safety.

Most of the highway safety news we have reported in the last few years has been good news. The rate of safety belt use has increased, the incidence of alcohol-impaired driving has fallen, and safety technology such as air bags has been incorporated in increasing numbers of vehicles. These efforts have had a positive effect on safety. In 1989, the national fatality rate fell to 2.2 fatalities per hundred million miles travelled -- the lowest level ever. This is good news indeed.

But at the same time we have noted opposing trends -- changes whose detrimental effect on safety may be masked by the larger positive trends. One

of these trends is the effect on safety of reducing vehicle size and weight. It is well known that in a collision between vehicles of differing weights, everything else being equal, the larger vehicle wins. The occupants of the smaller car are thus at greater risk of injury. But what about an environment in which the average weight falls for automobiles in every size class? That is what happened between the mid-1970s and early 1980s, when the average weight of the new passenger car fleet fell by about 1,000 pounds. The laws of physics dictate that there would be some adverse effect on safety -- the question is how much.

We began a series of studies to examine this issue in 1987. We reported on the first study, involving single-vehicle, non-rollover crashes, at the Experimental Vehicle Safety Conference in Stockholm in the spring of 1989, and released our study of single-vehicle rollover crashes in November of that year. The results of these initial studies confirmed our fears: there were significant adverse effects on safety. The smaller cars had a higher injury rate in non-rollover crashes and rolled over much more frequently, resulting in a substantial increase in rollover fatalities. The studies estimated that, on an annual basis, about 1,340 fatalities and 6,300 injuries in single-vehicle crashes could be attributed to the reduced size and weight of new vehicles. Our preliminary results on the study of multi-vehicle crashes show additional adverse safety effects and suggest that the adverse effects we have reported in single-vehicle crashes understate the effects of vehicle downsizing.

In the beginning of this year, we thus found ourselves with data demonstrating that the downsizing of vehicles in response to the petroleum shocks of the 1970s had a negative effect on safety. The situation appeared to be relatively stable, however, since there had been no significant downsizing since 1982 and since positive trends such as increased safety belt

use had apparently counterbalanced the effects of smaller vehicle size. We had, in fact, considered the possible effects on safety of allowing the passenger car CAFE standard to return to 27.5 mpg in model year 1990 after reducing it to 26.0 mpg in model years 1986-1988 and 26.5 mpg in model year 1989, and had concluded that a one-mile-per-gallon increase would not have an adverse safety effect, especially since there was no time to redesign the 1990 model vehicles. However, at the same time we noted that increases above 27.5 mpg could have safety effects and would have to be studied carefully.

The bill before the Subcommittee goes far beyond any CAFE increase we have ever considered in rulemaking. The 40 percent increase in fuel economy that the bill would mandate by the year 2001 translates into an increase of between 8 and 12 miles per gallon for each manufacturer, with the most fuel efficient fleets expected to make the greatest increase. We became increasingly concerned with the potential safety effects of this increase. As support grew for the Senate version of this bill, we became convinced that we had to address the safety issue more forcefully. The plain truth is that a law forcing the manufacturers to reduce vehicle size and weight could produce a generation of vehicles that would give their occupants less protection than current models give. In considering increases in CAFE standards, the Congress needs to know that a policy of energy conservation at all costs will have a substantial safety cost.

It is difficult to see how the manufacturers would meet the bill's fuel economy goals without making significant reductions in vehicle size and weight -- perhaps on the scale of the reductions during the earlier round of downsizing. Much of the fuel-saving technology that was available in the 1970s and 1980s has already been incorporated into the fleet. While technology can produce additional improvements, we have seen no credible study suggesting that technology which is acceptable to consumers can achieve the 40

percent goal, without significant downsizing or mix shifts to smaller cars. Even a 20-percent increase by the mid-1990s seems unreachable except by disruptive measures such as the removal of larger vehicle lines from the market.

To alert the Congress to the risks posed by the bill, we decided to call attention to our earlier studies of single-vehicle crashes and to accelerate work on the multi-vehicle study. I want to stress that these are studies of what has actually happened. The size and weight reductions of the 1970s and 1980s had an actual, measurable adverse effect on safety. The weight reductions all but mandated by this bill would have a similar effect, of a magnitude that could approach that of the earlier downsizing and that would offset all of the gains that we hope to achieve through an improved side impact standard. The bill would thus negate a decade of safety research and rulemaking in this area.

Mr. Chairman, I fully agree that the country needs to conserve petroleum. I also agree that we need to examine ways in which the motor vehicle fleet can use less fuel. NHTSA takes seriously its obligation to set fuel economy standards at the maximum feasible average fuel economy level, but we strongly believe that in this process we must consider the effects of fuel economy on safety. As the Administrator of NHTSA, I cannot agree that we should pay the safety price exacted by this bill. My job is to save lives, not to agree to a policy that may result in unnecessary deaths, injuries and suffering.

This concludes my remarks. I will be glad to answer any questions you might have.