

**ORAL TESTIMONY
FOR
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TRAFFIC SAFETY ADMINISTRATION
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND COMMERCE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, TRADE, AND
CONSUMER PROTECTION
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
HEARING ON
NHTSA OVERSIGHT: THE ROAD AHEAD
March 11, 2010**

Chairman Rush, Ranking Member Whitfield, and Members of the
Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the
Department of Transportation's vision for the future of the National
Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and its important
safety programs.

Transportation safety is the Department's highest priority. NHTSA's safety programs are an integral part of addressing that priority. Even before I was sworn in as Administrator on January 4, I knew NHTSA's programs work, and they work well. We just released numbers that show a continuing dramatic reduction in the overall number of highway deaths.

The Secretary just released a report this morning that projects that traffic fatalities have declined for the 15th consecutive quarter, and will be 33,963 in 2009, the lowest annual level since 1954. But we must do more. The loss of more than 33,000 people in traffic-related crashes in a single year represents a serious public health problem to our nation. We will not rest until that number is zero.

So how do we get there? Highway safety is a complex problem and NHTSA has built a broad spectrum of programs that address both behavioral and vehicle-related causes of highway deaths. The lynchpin of all our programs is good data, good science, and careful engineering.

When I was sworn in two months ago, I felt it was important to look at whether there was a need to improve NHTSA's effectiveness in this era of the global marketplace and rapidly changing technologies. One of my first decisions was to question whether NHTSA is being well-served by the four vehicle statutory authorities it relies on to regulate.

The reality is that while the current authority works and the various constituencies have learned to work with them, they were written in the 1960s and 1970s, when the world and the automobile market were profoundly different. The question I pose, and the answers I want to have, is whether NHTSA's statutory authorities accommodate the modern automobile? The modern competitive marketplace?

More importantly, do they allow us to regulate in a way that allows the industry to build and sell safe products that the consumer wants to drive? Do they allow us to promote safety, innovation, and fuel efficiency while still providing effective regulatory and enforcement oversight? And do they allow NHTSA to move at pace with the industry? I've asked our legal and program staff to take a look at our existing authorities; to answer these questions; and to make their best recommendations.

I believe this self-assessment is critical and supports the President's goals for transparency and accountability in government. And while we are taking a hard look at our authorities, I also commit to look at the current ethics rules. I believe the ethics standards set by this Administration are the highest ever established by any administration. I fully support Secretary LaHood's desire to tighten and enforce the ethics rules across the Department of Transportation. If there is evidence of any violations of these rules, swift and appropriate action will be taken.

The next question I asked of NHTSA is do we have the programmatic expertise we need to support our programs? NHTSA has a diverse and experienced workforce and we take full advantage of their skills, talent, and expertise. If, as we go forward, we find that we need to shore up our workforce in certain areas, we will recruit aggressively. We are currently requesting authority to hire 66 more people next year and will target these positions to meet our program needs.

For example, we will be conducting a comprehensive review of electronic throttle technologies across the industry. We will be looking at smart pedal technologies, also known as brake over-ride systems. We will assess the need to to develop performance standards for accelerator pedals to prevent pedal entrapment. We also plan to undertake work to evaluate the benefits of mandatory event data recorders in vehicles and we want to take a close look at push-button start and stop technologies.

I am very proud to say that NHTSA has an extremely robust communications program. Our communications efforts are integral to fulfilling our mission, and, to promoting accountability and transparency. Our track record in reaching out to consumers is tremendous. Congress gives us money every year to conduct anti-drunk driving campaigns, and seat belt campaigns. We also reach out on child passenger safety, teen drivers, and motorcycle safety, just to name a few. And we have a very good track record of reaching out to consumers and these efforts, combined with on- the-ground program activities like enforcement, contribute significantly to saving lives.

Our New Car Assessment Program plays a key role now in informing and helping to guide the purchasing decisions of consumers. It also induces manufacturers to look for marketing opportunities based on safety. Our new NCAP program will be launched this summer and will provide consumers even better information to assist with their decision to buy a car or a child safety seat.

We are leveraging NHTSA's resources and knowledge to broaden the safety dialogue with the consumer to include new topics and concerns. Some of our top initiatives include an on-line advertising campaign to increase consumer awareness and traffic to SaferCar.gov, our website dedicated to vehicle safety. We are also starting to use social networking to reach-out more effectively to the younger generation and to our increasingly mobile and technologically-savvy society.

We also want everyone to know that our agency has the most active defect investigation program in the world. We receive more than 30,000 complaints from consumers every year and we review each and every one quickly and carefully, and when warranted we act swiftly to correct defects through safety recalls or other measures. In February of this year alone, we received 10,000 complaints.

Over just the last three years, NHTSA's defect and compliance investigations have resulted in 524 recalls involving 23.5 million vehicles. Twenty percent of those involved foreign vehicles, while 80 percent were domestic.

I hope my testimony has given the committee a useful overview of the breadth of NHTSA's mission, its dedication to achievement of that mission, and the challenges that the agency faces.

During my tenure, I want to work with the Secretary and the Congress to strengthen and improve NHTSA so that it can continue to achieve its mission of saving lives, preventing injuries, and reducing economic costs due to road traffic crashes. We will be accountable to the President, to the Secretary of Transportation, and to the American Public, whom we are proud to serve.

Thank you and I look forward to answering your questions.