

DOT PLANS CHANGE IN BUMPER RULE

In response to widespread criticism, the Department of Transportation has proposed changes in its recently issued bumper rule. The planned changes are aimed, according to DOT, at strengthening requirements for 1974 model cars. Requirements for 1973 model cars would remain unchanged.

The proposed changes would increase test impact speeds to five miles per hour both front and rear, require that the car engine be running during barrier impact tests and add a general requirement which, DOT says, would increase protection of all safety related equipment and coincidentally reduce property damage.

Although DOT is proposing to raise impact requirements for front- and rear-end test impacts it has, in a separate action, responding to auto makers' requests, lowered corner impact pendulum test speeds from five miles per hour in the front and four miles per hour in the rear to three miles per hour for both front and rear. By lowering the corner impact test speed DOT may have actually weakened the overall protection nature of the rule.

The standard (FMVSS 215) as now written requires that 1974 model cars withstand a series of pendulum impacts — five miles per hour front-end and four miles per hour rear-end — plus a front-end barrier impact at five miles per hour and a rear-end barrier impact of 2.5 miles per hour without damage to specified "safety-related systems."

The initial rule, issued in April, requires that during and after the prescribed tests "each lamp or reflective device shall be free of cracks;" hood, trunk and door latches be "operable in the normal manner;" fuel systems, cooling systems and sealing devices be free of "leaks or constricted fluid passages," and exhaust systems be free of "constricted or open joints."

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In addition to these requirements, DOT has now proposed that the test impacts result in "no damage" that would "adversely" affect "any aspect of performance that

relates to motor vehicle safety." The proposal would also alter the rule to require that the vehicle's hood, trunk, and doors be "operable in the normal manner." As now written only the latches on hoods, trunks and doors are required to be "operable in the normal manner."

Safety administration officials admit that difficulties may arise in determining what "adversely" affects motor vehicle safety. (During low speed crash tests of 1971 model cars, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety found that following a five mile per hour barrier impact test of a Ford Pinto the spare tire could not be removed from the trunk of the car. When asked, a safety administration official could not say whether this would be interpreted as "adversely" affecting motor vehicle safety under the new proposal.)

Since the safety administration currently has no authority to regulate property damage, there are no provisions in the rule or in the proposed changes that would necessarily prevent expensive-to-repair damage, such as to quarter panels and other sheet metal, grilles and other trim.

However, Acting Traffic Safety Administrator, Douglas Toms said that, "It is our opinion that the proposed changes in the standard will, in effect, require the car manufacturer, beginning with 1974 models, to design in such a way that he gives protection against all significant vehicle damage."

Dr. William Haddon, Jr., president of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, told the Washington Post that he has "no evidence" that the proposed changes will effectively reduce property damage. He was quoted as saying that bumper systems which offer protection at twice the five mile per hour speed most recently proposed by DOT are "a design reality right now."

In addition to lowering speeds for corner impact pendulum tests, DOT also has responded to auto makers' requests for other changes in the rule by granting:

- Exemption of "license plate lamps" from coverage under the standard;
- Modification of the pendulum impact face by replacing a narrow ridge, called for in the original rule, with a broader impact surface.

Comments on the proposed amendments should be sent to the Docket Section, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Room 5221, 400 Seventh St., S.W., Washington, D.C. 20591, prior to August 1, 1971.

DOT OFFERS ALTERNATIVE TO PROPERTY DAMAGE BILL

The Department of Transportation has drafted a bill that calls for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to investigate the feasibility of establishing a consumer information program on automobile susceptibility to damage. The bill is being proposed as an alternative to pending federal legislation that would give the safety administration authority to regulate property damage — authority it does not want.

In recent Senate Commerce Committee hearings Acting Traffic Safety Administrator Douglas Toms made public DOT's proposal. He had said in earlier hearings that his agency is "unable to support" the property damage bill (S. 976), recently the subject of Senate Commerce Committee hearings, introduced by Sen. Philip A. Hart (D-Mich.).

In a letter transmitting DOT's bill to the Senate, Transportation Secretary John Volpe said that the consumer information program which the department is advocating "would assist the consumer in selecting the combination of safety and damageability that best suited his taste and needs."

The proposed bill, titled "Automobile Owners Information Act of 1971," though not yet introduced, would authorize the Secretary of Transportation:

- To complete before July 1, 1973, a feasibility study to determine the best way of establishing a consumer information program to inform the public of the "damage susceptibility and crashworthiness of all major makes and models of passenger cars;"
- To require insurance companies to supply DOT with accident claim data on vehicle damage and personal injury by make, model and year of passenger car along with a description of how such damage affects insurance rates;
- To require auto makers to furnish DOT with reports of their efforts to "improve the crashworthiness and reduce the damage susceptibility" of automobiles.

According to Toms the consumer information program would provide "the consumer with the basic information that he needs to make an informed choice in the market place."

Toms observed that "some say" the safety administration's current consumer information program on stopping distance, tire reserve load and passing and acceleration "has not been as effective as it might be." He claimed that the reason for its limited success is that the program is incomplete since there are "only three tiles in the mosaic" of consumer information which he says will eventually develop into "a fairly sophisticated profile of vehicle safety performance."

NTSB AGAIN URGES OCCUPANT RESTRAINTS FOR BUSES

For the third time since 1968 the National Transportation Safety Board has recommended that occupant restraints be required for passengers as well as drivers in all interstate buses.

The recommendation was made in a recent report following investigation of a fog-related bus crash in Petersburg, Ind. The safety board also recommended that occupants "be advised, both by a 'Fasten Seat Belt' illuminated sign and by notification by the driver, to fasten seat belts."

The safety board noted that 26 passengers aboard the bus involved in the Petersburg crash were injured. One, a fatally injured four month old girl, was

thrown through the rear window of the bus. Many of the passengers received upper body injuries from impacting overhead luggage racks, and rib fractures and bruises were suffered in secondary collisions with armrests, the board said.

"The installation of occupant restraints and their use by the driver and passengers on the bus would have reduced the number and severity of injuries," the safety board concluded.

As in earlier reports (See Status Report, Vol. 6, No. 7, April 12, 1971), the safety board recommended that the Federal Highway Administration and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration use rulemaking authority to require installation of occupant restraints in buses. Taking issue with the safety board's recommendation, Kenneth L. Pierson, deputy director of FHWA's Bureau of Motor Carrier Safety, was quoted in the Washington Post as saying, "It is our position that seat belts would increase rather than decrease the chances of injury. This is based on a premise that the present lap belts would act as a fulcrum for the body following impact. The upper torso would be thrown forward so the head would strike the seat in front of him.

"We believe that in presently configured buses the passenger would fare better if his full body is allowed to move forward, so the impact is spread over the entire body."

Pierson told Status Report that the bureau finds itself at odds with the safety board on occupant restraints because of "engineering value judgements." There are "valid differences of opinion" on occupant restraints in buses, he said. He also mentioned that "cost effectiveness" plays an important role in the bureau's position that passenger restraints should not be required in buses.

CLARIFICATION — We have received numerous inquiries concerning "The Pavers and The Paved," the new book written by Institute staff member Ben Kelley. Because "The Pavers and The Paved" was written by Mr. Kelley in a private capacity, it is not available through the Institute. Inquiries and orders relating to the book should be directed to local book stores or to its publisher, Donald W. Brown, Inc., 60 East 55th St., New York, New York 10022.

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STATUS REPORT