

## GAO Hits Weak Highway Hazard Effort

The problem of roadside and other highway hazards, and the lack of emphasis on programs to correct them, has reached "such a magnitude now that Congress should step in," according to the U.S. Comptroller General. He advocates "a major national program in line with the growing congressional, departmental and public concern over the large number of fatalities, injuries and accidents that occur annually on our highways."

In a report prepared for the House Public Works Committee's Subcommittee on Investigations and Oversight, and in accompanying testimony, U.S. Comptroller General Elmer B. Staats, who heads the General Accounting Office, said that the "limited progress" that has been made in correcting the problem of roadside hazards "raises a question as to whether the Department of Transportation has taken all feasible action to implement a high-priority program to identify and correct hazardous highway locations."

He said that the present "fragmented approach to the problem" can be traced to a lack of federal guidance and urged that DOT's Federal Highway Administration "provide stronger leadership" by "setting aside a specific part of highway trust funds to be used annually for the elimination or correction of hazardous highway locations."

Staats told the subcommittee that "a major effort to eliminate highway hazards could contribute materially to the department's announced intention to make the nation's highways as safe as possible."

He also pointed to a 1970 study conducted by the FHWA that shows "the cost effectiveness of the highway safety improvement work, in terms of lives saved . . . to be about five times greater than that of regular highway construction work. In terms of injuries avoided, it was more than three times greater." However, he said, states have made "safety oriented" expenditures of only about 2.1 per cent of the approximately \$31 billion in federal-aid funds spent for highway construction from 1964 through 1970.

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Staats told the subcommittee that his agency had surveyed fatality figures and highway spending practices in Colorado, Illinois, Missouri, Montana, Oregon and Utah, which, he said, spent only 3 per cent of their federal-aid highway funds during the seven years to eliminate highway hazards. The six states, which he characterized as "fairly average," had not "routinely set aside and used a designated part of their federal-aid funds to correct hazardous locations," Staats said. According to the GAO report, such a

“fragmented approach” to correcting the hazards exists because “highway administration guidance to states largely has been advisory, rather than mandatory, and because quantified goals have not been established for the program.”

He said that a four-year FHWA program established in 1965 to “inventory” and “improve” hazardous locations fell short of its intended goal because “FHWA did not carry through on its plan to achieve substantial completion of the inventoried safety improvement projects within (the) four years.” Staats said that in 1969 the road building agency abandoned its four-year program and replaced it with a policy that “urged the states to (voluntarily) maintain a continuing safety improvement program.” He pointed out that the revised policy “did not include standards against which to measure state progress.”

The GAO report shows that the six surveyed states lack sufficient crash data to accurately identify high crash locations. “The incompleteness of accident data and the failure of the six states to systematically develop comprehensive inventories of correctable hazardous locations routinely used for developing and carrying out safety projects can lead to situations where relatively hazardous locations may not be identified for consideration in programming annual safety improvement work,” the report says.

He noted that current safety improvements primarily involve “recognized types of hazards” such as bridge abutments, unyielding signposts and spear-like guardrails on Interstate highways rather than “correction of identified hazardous locations” as determined by crash data on all highways and roads.

### *GAO Examples Of ‘Fragmented Approach’*

The GAO report illustrates cases of what it calls the “fragmented approach” to highway hazard correction. It singles out Colorado, where officials were unaware of the high accident rate on one section of highway, and Missouri, where officials had known of a hazardous location “since 1965” but had no plans for correction before 1974.

**Colorado** “determined that two bridges should be improved in the interest of safety. The bridges, including approaches, were reconstructed in September 1969 at a total cost of about \$616,000. . . . One of the structures served less than 200 vehicles a day; the other served 2,700 vehicles a day. During the three-year period preceding reconstruction, a total of eight accidents had occurred at both locations, including two injury accidents and six property damage accidents.

“At the same time a 3½-mile stretch of hazardous road containing a number of dangerous curves that could have been improved at an estimated cost of about \$700,000 remained uncorrected. This road served 2,700 vehicles a day. During the three-year period, 38 accidents occurred on this road section including one fatal accident, 32 injury accidents, and five property damage accidents.”

In **Missouri**, “We noted one hazardous highway location . . . which had been known to the highway department since 1965 but which was not scheduled for correction until 1974—the date when the road was planned for complete reconstruction. In the 3½-year period from January 1968 to June 1971, five persons were killed and 15 persons were injured in 19 separate traffic accidents at this location.”

He said that the federal practice of paying 90 per cent of Interstate highway construction and "improvement" costs and FHWA emphasis on "work to upgrade the safety of the Interstate system and other high-speed highways" serve as incentives for states to concentrate on Interstate highway safety improvement. He said, "Primary emphasis needs to be given to developing and expanding the high-accident spot improvement concept on non-Interstate highways."

The GAO report urged that:

- The federal government earmark funds "specifically to eliminate highway hazards";
- States identify "hazardous locations on the basis of actual accident experience";
- States eliminate or correct hazards "based on potential for accident reduction in relation to the cost of the correction."

Bills have been introduced in both the Senate and House (S 3701 and HR 13539) to provide \$200 million over a two-year period for hazardous location improvement.

## **NHTSA Warns Public Of VW Wiper Hazards**

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has warned Volkswagen owners that some models produced over a 22-year period are equipped with windshield wipers that may fail "while driving in rain or snow conditions."

The public warning came some two months after NHTSA employees were warned of the problem in an "in-house" newsletter. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 7, No. 10, May 22, 1972.)

The agency says it has received complaints of windshield wiper failures from more than 70 Volkswagen owners.

The warning said the windshield wipers "fail to function due to the wiper arm securing screw loosening up on the wiper shaft, under normal operation. . . . This failure can endanger the safety of persons riding in the vehicle, the safety of persons riding in adjacent vehicles and the safety of pedestrians, when the failure occurs with the vehicle in motion."

The failures are reported to occur on Volkswagen sedans, trucks, convertibles, Karmann-Ghia and station wagon models manufactured between 1947 and 1969.

According to Lowell Dodge, director of the Center for Auto Safety, a "reliable source" informed his organization that NHTSA engineers had recommended that Volkswagen be forced to conduct a defect notification campaign on the problem. However, Andrew Detrick, director of NHTSA's Office of Defects Investigation, told *Status Report*, "We haven't reached that point yet." He said that a similar problem may exist with other cars as well, and that the agency has requested information on windshield wiper design specifications from other auto makers.

Detrick urged motorists who have experienced windshield wiper failures to notify the Office of Defects Investigation, 400 7th St., S.W., Washington, D.C. 20590.

## *Volpe To Seek Mandatory Belt Laws*

Transportation Secretary John A. Volpe has endorsed mandatory safety belt legislation by approving a National Highway Traffic Safety Administration plan to include guidelines for such laws in its proposed revision of Highway Safety Standards. When the revised standards are issued, states will be faced with the possibility of losing 10 per cent of their federal highway construction funds unless they enact belt use laws.

According to a safety administration official, the proposals will be made public during the first weeks of July.

### **Noted**

*Status Report* Vol. 7, No. 11, June 12, 1972, neglected to note that the research on the effectiveness of the Victoria, Australia, safety belt use law, reported in the article entitled, " 'Australian Experiment' Found Successful," was conducted for the Institute by Dr. John C. Lane, director of aviation medicine for the Australian Department of Civil Aviation, and Dr. Laszlo A. Foldvary, a statistician formerly with the Australian Road Research Board and now a private consultant.

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### **STATUS REPORT**

**Ralph W. Hoar, Jr., Editor**

INSURANCE INSTITUTE for HIGHWAY SAFETY  
WATERGATE SIX HUNDRED • WASHINGTON, D.C. 20037  
(AREA CODE 202-333-0770)