

Provides 'Little Assurance'

NHTSA Compliance Test Program Criticized

The American public has "little assurance" that the cars it buys actually comply with federal safety standards, according to a recent General Accounting Office report to the Congress. GAO blames the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's compliance testing program for the problem.

The report indicates that the agency has:

- Failed to use "valuable" information collected by its own investigators from real world crashes;
- Spent too much money testing tires, to the detriment of vehicle testing;
- Delayed action in cases of known noncompliance to the point that it "could expose the public to unnecessary risks of accidents, injuries and deaths";
- Ignored advice from both inside and outside the agency on ways to improve its efforts to determine whether auto makers are meeting federal safety standards.

Another deficiency cited in the report is that NHTSA is only "testing about 55 vehicles each year for compliance with some of the safety standards." The report points out that "the motor vehicle industry annually produces about 9 million vehicles, comprising 500 different makes and models."

In 1969, the report notes, the former director of the National Highway Safety Bureau (now NHTSA), William Haddon, Jr., M.D., told a subcommittee of the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce that "... samples of many hundreds of car models should be tested during each model year for the Bureau's compliance program to be considered adequate....I think that each make-model

combination should be tested at least once. I don't think that is asking too much when you are talking about production of some 9 million vehicles a year." According to the report, NHTSA cites "budgetary constraints and the needs of other priority areas" as the reason for its limited compliance testing program. \$2.2 million was appropriated for NHTSA's compliance testing in the current fiscal year.

The National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966 requires each

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manufacturer to certify that its own products meet federal safety requirements. However, the agency says it would be "naive of us to expect a manufacturer to submit certification data that showed him to be in non-compliance." The few agency-sponsored compliance tests that are conducted are performed by private contractors.

(Although not mentioned in the report, the Nixon Administration has impounded \$9 million that had been earmarked by the Congress for construction of NHTSA's own compliance test facility. See *Status Report*, Vol. 8, No. 4, Feb. 12, 1973.)

Of the "millions of vehicles" that have been recalled since NHTSA began its testing program in 1968, the agency's compliance tests have resulted in only "four domestic vehicle recalls involving about 105,000 vehicles and four recalls of vehicles produced by foreign manufacturers, involving 140,000 vehicles. Most of the domestic vehicles were recalled as a result of a single test," according to the GAO report.

(To date, most vehicles have been recalled because of design or manufacturing defects, not because they fail to meet Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard performance requirements.)

'VALUABLE' INFORMATION IGNORED

Since 1968 the safety administration has spent about \$7 million on multidisciplinary accident investigation teams. These teams are supposed to identify factors that contribute to crashes and injuries in those crashes. However, the safety administration pays little attention to these data when setting its priorities for compliance testing, according to the GAO report.

During their check of crash investigation files, GAO investigators found nine cases in which windshields on 1971 model Opel Kadetts "had become completely detached" from their mountings. On inquiry, they discovered that NHTSA had scheduled the Opel Kadett for compliance testing – but for brake performance, not windshield retention. After initially planning its compliance tests, GAO says, the agency realized that the program "did not call for enough vehicles to be crash tested. A decision was made to crash test 15 more vehicles, including the vehicle in question. When the vehicle was crash tested, its windshield became completely detached," the report says.

The agency later discovered that the manufacturer had certified the 1971 model as meeting the windshield retention safety standard on the basis of tests performed on 1967 and 1968 models. The vehicles were recalled. (The law does not require that manufacturers' compliance certification be based on tests.)

The report says that crash investigation teams also identified "nine vehicle makes that had fuel tank problems in accidents that had been investigated. The safety administration planned to test the fuel systems of two of these vehicle makes during its 1972 testing program; for the remaining vehicle makes, either tests had not been made or, where tests had been made, retesting was considered desirable but had not been scheduled." The GAO report does not specify the nine vehicle makes that are reported to have had fuel tank problems.

The report says that in 1972 NHTSA decided which vehicles it would test "based primarily on prior test results or the lack of prior tests." Crash data were not a factor, it says.

The report notes that in 1969 both "a special task force" of agency officials and the National Motor Vehicle Safety Advisory Council recommended that the compliance testing program place emphasis on high payoff areas – especially crash survivability. "The compliance testing program, however, has not been

systematically directed toward problem indications and priority areas having a high potential for reducing traffic accidents, deaths and injuries," the report says.

TOO MUCH EMPHASIS ON TIRE TESTING

Although GAO does "not dispute the importance of tire testing," it says that NHTSA is spending "considerably more than is warranted" for testing compliance with tire safety standards. Over the past three years more than half of all the money spent by NHTSA on compliance tests was used to determine if tire makers are meeting two of NHTSA's 34 safety standards, the report says.

"If the safety administration's emphasis on testing tires were brought more in line with the small significance of tires as a factor in traffic accidents, proportionately greater attention could be focused on safety problem indicators and on standard areas having a higher potential for reducing traffic accidents, injuries and deaths," GAO says in its report.

DELAYED ACTION

In addition to questioning NHTSA's priorities, the GAO report also questions the length of time between discovery of noncompliance and action by the agency to remedy the problem.

"The length of time it takes to resolve test failure cases raises a question as to how much safety benefit the public receives from some of the safety administration's investigations. For example, in a case that led to a tire recall in May, 1970, some of the tires involved had been produced in early calendar year 1968 and had failed safety administration tests that same year. Although the tires were later recalled, they had been in use about 2 years before the public was informed of the safety hazard involved.

Copies of the GAO report, *For Safer Motor Vehicles – More Effective Efforts Needed to Insure Compliance with Federal Safety Standards, B-164497(3)*, are available for \$1.00 each from the U.S. General Accounting Office, Room 6417, 441 G St., N.W., Washington, D.C. 20548.

NHTSA Proposes Belated Used Vehicle Standards

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has finally proposed "safety standards" for vehicles in use. The Congress had directed NHTSA to issue such standards by September, 1968.

The proposed standards – actually an expanded vehicle inspection program – would cover three vehicle systems (brakes, suspension and steering, and tires and wheels), which the agency says are "critical to the prevention of accidents." They would apply to all motor vehicles with a gross vehicle weight rating of 10,000 lbs. or less.

Although the proposed vehicle safety standards and inspection procedures for vehicles in use are presented in the form of a federal motor vehicle safety standard, NHTSA says that the requirements are "intended to be implemented by states through the highway safety program" standard on periodic motor vehicle inspection issued in 1967 under the Highway Safety Act of 1966.

INSPECTION STANDARDS AND PROCEDURES

The proposed standards only partially cover three vehicle systems and do not include checks for such conditions as holes in the exhaust system, inoperative front and rear lights, and operability and deterioration of seat belts and shoulder harnesses. An NHTSA official told *Status Report* that "in the

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attempt to make the inspection within practicable limits . . . [the standards and procedures] were tailored to state-of-the-art techniques." According to NHTSA, current information "does not support the imposition of an elaborate scheme" of inspection.

NHTSA claims that research shows that 6 per cent of the vehicle crashes studied "were caused by failure of mechanical components with the probability that an additional 11 per cent" were "caused or contributed to by component degradation." Of those crashes, 77 per cent involved brake systems, steering and suspension systems, and tires and wheel assemblies, according to the agency.

Brakes. Among the proposed requirements are that vehicle brake systems be checked for leaks, deterioration of brake hoses and assemblies, and thickness and integrity of the brake linings and pads. The inspection includes both visual checks and performance tests. The standard does not propose any requirements for stopping distances, vehicle deceleration rates or braking forces that must be met by vehicles of different weights in stops from varying speeds.

Steering and Suspension. The proposed standards include requirements on the amount of free play allowed in the steering wheel and linkage, a partial check of wheel alignment, and examination for damage to ball joints, shock absorbers and other suspension components. The inspection of the suspension and steering system relies primarily on visual checks. An internal NHTSA Office of Defects Investigation memorandum has noted that fatigue cracks in Ford lower control arms, a front suspension component whose failure causes loss of steering control, cannot be detected visually. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 7, No. 7, April 10, 1972.)

Tires and Wheels. The proposed requirements include a check to insure that tires have more than 1/16 of an inch of tread depth and are free from "chunking, bumps, knots or bulges" and exposure of the tire cord or belting material. The wheel examination includes a check for cracks. Again the primary emphasis is on visual examinations.

USED VEHICLE PROGRAM HISTORY

The National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966 directed DOT to study the need for used vehicle standards and report its findings by September, 1967. In a detailed June, 1968, report to the Congress, entitled *Safety for Motor Vehicles in Use*, DOT outlined a used vehicle safety program which would center on "mandatory periodic vehicle inspection in the states" and safety performance standards for used vehicles. The report also covered several other areas of NHTSA's projected used vehicle safety program. They included:

- Standards for licensing repair shops and establishing skill levels for mechanics;
- Equipment standards for replacement parts;
- Performance requirements that new motor vehicles would have to meet after periods of extended use;
- Safety standards that would facilitate diagnosis and repair of worn and failed parts.

In its September, 1970, Program Plan for Motor Vehicle Safety Standards, NHTSA projected the issuance of standards on "vehicle maintenance," and "operational reliability" and a consumer information regulation on "maintenance schedules" for used vehicles. In a subsequent version of the Program Plan, NHTSA announced that further action on those standards had been delayed.

(Under requirements of the Highway Safety Act of 1966, every state must have a highway safety program which is "in accordance with uniform standards" established by DOT. NHTSA's highway safety
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program standard on vehicle inspection specifies that the inspection cover "systems, subsystems and components having substantial relation to safe vehicle performance." NHTSA's program manual on the vehicle inspection standard establishes a listing of vehicle equipment such as brakes, exhaust systems, restraint equipment and tires that it urges states to include among their inspected items.

(In July, 1972, NHTSA proposed a revision of its highway safety program standards. The proposed standard on vehicle inspection would require inspections to cover "at least the braking, suspension and steering systems and tire condition.")

In April, 1972, NHTSA issued what it called a "Motor Vehicle in Use Program Plan" that projected a timetable for the development and implementation of used vehicle standards and inspection procedures. The program plan projected issuance of final used vehicles safety standards by June, 1973, and projected development of a prototype inspection program that would demonstrate the implementation of the used vehicle standard by October, 1973.

The notice of proposed rulemaking on the used vehicle safety standards and inspection procedures appeared in the *Federal Register*, Vol. 38, No. 62, April 2, 1973. Comments on the proposal are due by July 5, 1973, and should be sent to Docket 73-9, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Docket Section, Room 5221, 400 Seventh St., S.W., Washington, D.C. 20590.

Copies of DOT's 1968 report entitled *Safety for Motor Vehicles in Use* can be obtained from: Vehicles in Use, Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, Watergate 600, Washington, D.C. 10037.

Consumer Groups Ask Standards For Light Trucks And Vans

The Center for Auto Safety and Consumers Union have urged the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to make all of its automobile safety standards apply to light trucks and multipurpose passenger vehicles such as vans and mobile homes.

The two consumer groups charged that the current exemption of such vehicles from many of the federal motor vehicle safety standards forces consumers to "sacrifice their own safety" in order to obtain the "extra space offered" by those vehicles.

In a joint petition to NHTSA, the two groups argued that vehicle manufacturers, DOT and consumer groups have "generally agreed" that multipurpose passenger vehicles (mpv's) and light trucks are "primarily used by the same persons for the same purposes as passenger cars." Yet, light trucks and mpv's are exempt from several auto standards that have "proved to be major life-savers," the groups said. They cited standards that require energy absorbing steering columns, head restraints and interior padding.

The Center and CU argued that the need for governmental action is "critical" because of what they claim is the "manufacturer's complete disregard for the safety of the buyers" of light trucks and mpv's. The groups noted that "many of the safety features" from which such vehicles are exempt "are unavailable as options . . . even though the increased cost could be directly passed to the buyer."

In support of their request, the groups noted that the National Transportation Safety Board, in a report issued last fall, had also urged NHTSA to end the current exemption for light trucks and mpv's. NHTSA is aware that while light trucks "have a slightly lower incidence of accident involvement, the severity rate (serious and fatal injury) is on the order of seven times as great for light trucks as for passenger

cars." This difference is "in part attributable to the non-applicability of certain standards," the board said. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 7, No. 17, Sept. 18, 1972.)

While requesting that passenger car standards "be applied across the board to mpv's and lightweight trucks," the two groups said that short of this, the following "critical safety standards" should be applied immediately:

- FMVSS 201, which prohibits "unyielding panels, knobs and pillars" in the occupant compartment.
- FMVSS 202, which requires head restraints. The groups said that the present back windows in pick-up trucks present an "unyielding surface which may prevent a whiplash" but cause "possibly fatal cuts and gashes" if they break.
- FMVSS 203 and 204, which require energy absorbing steering columns and limit the rearward displacement of the steering column into the passenger compartment during frontal collisions.
- FMVSS 216, which sets roof crush resistance performance standards. For "open-top, off-road vehicles," the groups urged that roll bars be required.
- FMVSS 301, which requires crashworthy gas tanks.

Two-Year Status Report Index Available

Indexes of *Status Report*, Volumes VI (1971) and VII (1972) are now available. Copies may be obtained, at no charge, from "Index", Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, Watergate 600, Washington, D.C. 20037.

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