

NHTSA Expands Study Of Fuel Tank Defects

A wide-ranging investigation into fuel tank problems, which may lead to additional defect recalls and also to tougher federal safety standards, has been undertaken by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).

“We are looking for evidence of fuel tank failures in all models of cars, both large and small,” NHTSA’s deputy administrator, Howard Dugoff, told *Status Report*. “After reviewing existing accident data – which is admittedly limited – and carrying out engineering analyses of design to help us identify suspicious-looking systems, we’ll decide which cars to focus on.”

NHTSA’s investigation is a substantial broadening of its recent probe of fuel tank problems in Ford Pintos and Mercury Bobcats. It will include a search of consumer complaint files, the Fatal Accident Reporting System files, and the Multi-Disciplinary Accident Investigation reports.

DECISION LATER ON DEFECT INVESTIGATIONS

In a letter to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety describing the investigation, NHTSA Administrator Joan Claybrook said that on completion of the review – in “several weeks” – the agency will “decide whether to initiate defect investigations into the fuel tank integrity of any specific vehicles.” Dugoff told *Status Report* that, in addition, the investigation could lead to proposals for toughening existing fuel tank crashworthiness standards for new vehicles.

Dugoff said that the study involves large as well as smaller cars. But he stressed that NHTSA has particular “reason to feel nervous” about the performance of small-car fuel tanks in crashes, from the standpoint of rupture, fuel loss, and possible fire.

NHTSA officials confirmed the possibility that crash-testing of some models may be carried out by the agency if the need is indicated by the review of the records. Because the cost of conducting crash tests of all cars would be prohibitive, NHTSA is trying to determine whether “certain cars are more susceptible” than others to fuel tank failure, a NHTSA spokesman explained. He said that if the data show that certain cars have common characteristics resulting in a greater incidence of fuel tank fires, the agency would conduct crash tests.

IIHS recently brought to NHTSA’s attention the continuing problems associated with fuel tanks. William Haddon, Jr., M.D., president of the Institute, wrote in a letter to Claybrook:

“In 1973, we ran six brand new 1973 automobiles at moderate speeds into the rear ends of six other brand new cars. In each case the fuel system of the target vehicle ruptured with considerable spillage from the gasoline tank and/or its adjacent fuel system. [See table.] On November 6, 1973, we submitted the results to NHTSA’s Docket 70-20, noting specific deficiencies in all six target vehicles.

“A review of the results of the previous tests concerning one of those vehicles, the Toyota Corona, and the report of a real-world crash resulting in severe burns to a young girl leads me to suggest that you should examine the fuel system deficiencies of this make of vehicle, alert the public, and take the other actions the facts warrant.”

In the 1973 tests, Haddon explained, “the net result of the vehicle’s design was to inject lethal quantities of burning gasoline into the passenger compartment, surrounding even the dummy driver with flame within one-third of a second from the moment of the rear impact, and while the crash was still underway.” (See *Status Report*, Vol. 8, No. 11, May 29, 1973.)

(In 1973, the Institute produced a film, *Cars That Crash and Burn*, that documents these crash tests and discusses the problem and some of its solutions. Free loan copies are available from Association Films, Inc., 866 Third Ave., New York, N.Y. 10022.)

The test results were the subject of Congressional hearings that led to passage of legislation requiring DOT to issue a standard requiring that new vehicles be able to withstand moderate-speed rear impacts. The standard, with performance test requirements, took effect starting in the 1977 model year for new cars, and in the 1978 model year for multi-purpose passenger vehicles up to 6,000 lbs. GVW. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 10, No. 3, Feb. 5, 1975.)

The National Association of Attorneys General recently submitted to NHTSA a resolution passed at its June meeting calling for crash testing of all compact and subcompact cars equipped with gas tanks

This table was reprinted from *Status Report*, Vol. 8, No. 11, May 29, 1973.

**INSURANCE INSTITUTE FOR HIGHWAY SAFETY
SUMMARY OF RESULTS
1973 MODERATE SPEED FRONT-INTO-REAR CRASH TESTS**

MOVING CAR	PARKED CAR	SPEED	GAS LEAKAGE	FIRE
1973 Plymouth Fury III	1973 Chevrolet Vega	39.8 mph	Yes Vega	Potential
1973 Datsun 610	1973 Ford Pinto	38.5 mph	Yes Pinto	Potential
1973 Ford Galaxie 500	1973 AMC Ambassador	37.2 mph	Yes Ambassador	Potential
1973 Volkswagen Beetle	1973 Plymouth Fury III	38.8 mph	Yes Fury	Initiated
1973 Chevrolet Impala	1973 GM Opel 1900	36.4 mph	Yes Opel	Potential
1973 AMC Gremlin	1973 Toyota Corona	39.8 mph	Yes Corona	Spontaneous

NOTE: In addition to the moderate speed front-into-rear crashes of 1973 vehicles tabulated above, in an earlier pilot test a 1959 Oldsmobile 98 was crashed into the rear end of a 1964 Mercury Comet at 39.2 miles per hour. Spontaneous ignition occurred.

located behind the rear axle, as is the case with the Pinto and Bobcat. The resolution stated that “the available expert evidence indicates that the two defects occurring in Pintos and Bobcats are likely to exist in other subcompact cars.” (The two defects referred to were identified by NHTSA as a fuel filler pipe length that may contribute to disconnection from the tank, and exposure of the front of the fuel tank to rear underbody components.)

Responding to the association resolution, Claybrook explained her decision to conduct a full review of the fuel tank problem. “There are many questions which we believe can be answered without conducting extensive collision tests,” she said.

Most recent concerns over auto fuel tanks have been highlighted by the problems with the Ford Pintos and Mercury Bobcats. The Ford Motor Co., under pressure from NHTSA, has announced its intention to recall some 1.5 million 1971-76 Pinto sedans and 1975-76 Bobcat sedans to make the vehicles less vulnerable to fire in rear-end collisions. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 13, No. 8, June 15, 1978.) Public awareness of these fuel-tank problems has been aroused by continued crash-fire incidents since the recall notice. At least three persons have died in fiery Pinto rear-end crashes as details of the Ford recall have been awaited. Two small girls were burned to death in the back seat of a 1971 Pinto struck from the rear on a highway at Waltersburg, Pa. The mother, who was driving, and one child escaped the flames.

Three days later a New Jersey woman died in the flaming crash of a 1973 Pinto when it was struck from the rear by another car near Lancaster, Pa.

Ford has indicated it plans to install a plastic shield in front of the recalled vehicles’ gas tanks to protect them from puncturing by rear-axle projections, and to replace the fuel tank filler tube to correct separation problems. NHTSA, however, is not satisfied that the corrective measures have been sufficiently tested to prove their value. (See box.)

July 18, 1978

Herbert L. Misch, Vice President
Environmental and Safety Engineering Staff
Ford Motor Company
The American Road
Dearborn, Michigan 48121

Dear Mr. Misch:

On July 13, 1978, representatives of Ford met with agency representatives to discuss the proposed correction to the Pinto fuel tank defect. We were disappointed to learn that Ford was prepared to go ahead with the recall and correction based solely upon a single barrier crash test conducted at a speed of 25 miles-per-hour in which there was no leakage. Our initial defect determination emerged from vehicle-to-vehicle tests conducted at speeds in excess of thirty miles-per-hour. Although the Ford representatives stated at our meeting that Ford does not intend to conduct such tests of the proposed correction, we think that such tests should be performed, and urge you to reconsider. We would appreciate your letting us know your decision by July 25.

As you realize, this agency has the continuing duty to monitor defect remedies in order to assure that the motoring public is protected against the defect.

Sincerely,

Howard J. Dugoff
Deputy Administrator

Haddon Urges Auto Maker 'Leadership' For Safety

Speaking to a gathering of automotive men in Detroit, William Haddon, Jr., M.D., president of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, has outlined a grim picture of the human costs of vehicle crashes and challenged auto makers "to start providing the real leadership and aggressive competition on this issue, in the best spirit of the free enterprise system, of which they are capable."

"Despite three generations of motor vehicle manufacturing," Haddon said, "there is not for sale anywhere in the United States or abroad a car, van, truck cab, or tank trailer for hazardous cargoes that is not technologically backward from the standpoint of the protection afforded people in the crashes that inevitably occur."

Haddon urged the auto manufacturing community to break with the past and assume a new positive role, saying, "Surely the time has long since arrived for motor vehicle manufacturers:

- to comment more constructively on government proposals to reduce crash injuries;
- to themselves propose needed Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards, including the substantial upgrading of the standards from a decade ago that were intended explicitly by the Congress to be relatively easy-to-meet 'initial standards';
- to show leadership in developing research safety vehicles of many types – instead of leaving the job, as at present, to the federal government – and in explaining objectively to the public the specific injury-reduction goals sought and the means of approach,
- and, as they so well know how to do, to exceed the federal 'minimum motor vehicle safety standards' both as free-enterprise competitors and to guarantee far less wastage of life and limb."

'SAFETY ISN'T SOLD'

In his speech before the *Automotive News* World Congress, Haddon noted the reluctance of auto makers to give priority to safety concerns. "I do not know with certainty who actually fabricated that brilliantly negative slogan, the deception that 'Safety doesn't sell,' but it is not so," Haddon said. "What is so is that 'Safety isn't sold,' by U.S. and many foreign manufacturers. Buyers have even been strongly discouraged from buying safer cars."

Elaborating on his rebuttal of the "Safety doesn't sell" argument, Haddon recalled the case of the 1956 Ford, which proponents of the slogan usually cite. He quoted from the testimony of Alex Haynes, director of Ford's Advanced Product Study, before a Congressional hearing in 1957: "Since the 1956 introduction, 160,000 vehicles were purchased with seat belts installed at the factory. In addition over 200,000 belts have been furnished to dealers for their installation." These sales figures "are considerably higher than originally anticipated," Haynes had testified.

Haddon noted: "Clearly, Ford's transient promotion of its safety package was a success – hardly evidence in any way supporting the tragically lethal dogma that 'Safety doesn't sell.' "

PUBLIC AWARENESS GROWS

In spite of the auto makers' negative influence, Haddon said, the public is becoming increasingly aware that the continuing auto crash toll is avoidable. "I believe Americans are finding out that much of the time,

they and their loved ones don't need to die or be maimed just because crashes take place," he said, "and they are reflecting this awareness through all three branches of their government, through their press, and in other ways."

The motor vehicle crash toll is huge, Haddon pointed out, even though some gains have been made in controlling it. Motor vehicle crashes produce more new quadriplegics and paraplegics each year in the United States than all other causes combined. Crash injuries are a leading cause of epilepsy. Major damage to the face in motor vehicle crashes is by far the leading cause of non-cosmetic plastic surgery. Injuries in crashes are the leading cause of death for teenagers.

In spite of such evidence of human suffering and tragedy, Haddon said, it is often suggested that the problem is overstated because the risks of death and injury per mile travelled are low and declining. "There is, however, a much more important and meaningful measure than such mileage-weighted statistics," Haddon explained, "namely, the numbers of deaths and injuries expected during the lifetime of each vehicle." On the basis of reasonable estimates, he said, every 1,000 new vehicles during their lifetime will be involved in between 2,000 and 3,000 crashes, kill, on average, more than three people, and injure more than 300.

"Nonetheless, there is much evidence that long-practical improvements in motor vehicles would greatly reduce the totals of the maimed and dead, even in many very severe crashes," Haddon observed. "Despite this, it surely would be an overstatement to suggest that vehicle manufacturers have shown aggressive leadership in providing such life-respecting improvements. In fact, it is already a matter of American history that some manufacturers have fought – too often successfully, by many means, over a period of many years – to delay even minimal improvements in vehicles." (See box.)

'INCORRECT INFORMATION' CIRCULATED

Haddon charged the auto makers have been guilty of failing to disseminate favorable information about available life-saving technologies, as in the case of the air bag, and added: "Even more tragic is evidence that decision-makers in vehicle manufacturing companies are operating on and communicating relevantly incorrect information . . ." He cited two examples, both dealing with occupant restraints. In

The Minimum Approach

Noting that auto makers have made only "minimal improvements" in vehicles as required by the federal minimum performance standards, Haddon said, "manufacturers have often accomplished this in ways that leave their customers and other users of their products essentially no margin of safety above the modest, federally-required minimums – in fact, with so little extra that even tiny variations in the Federal compliance tests produce failures.

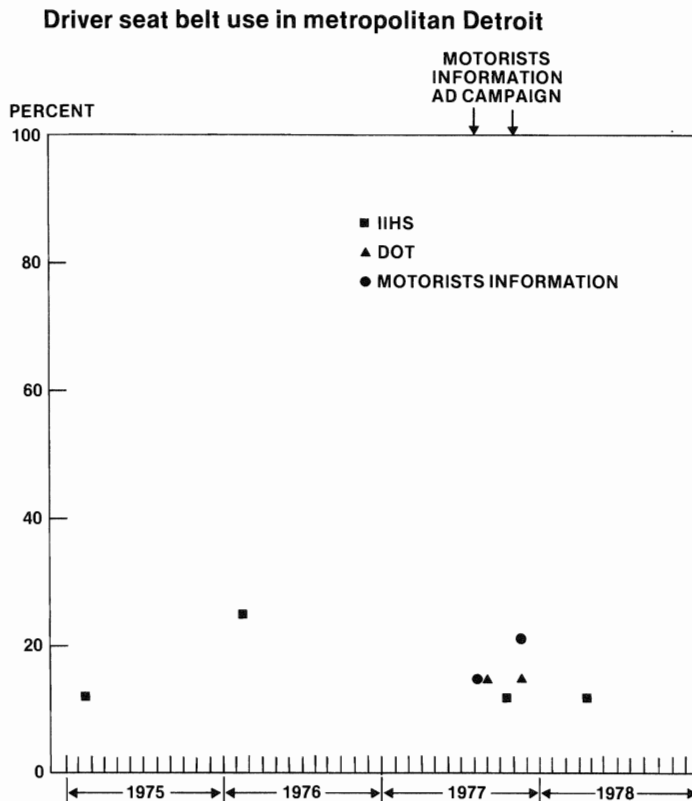
"In illustration, one manufacturer (General Motors) in contesting an 'Initial Determination' by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration that its testing of one of the manufacturer's 1977 vehicles (the Chevette) for compliance with the fuel spillage requirements of Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard 301 had found it to be in non-compliance, stated: '. . . It would be improper to find a vehicle out of compliance on the basis of a test conducted at a performance level in excess of the requirement of the standard, *no matter how slight*. . .' (emphasis added). The manufacturer then went on to argue, *inter alia*, that, 'It is clear that the actual barrier speed could have been at least .19 mph over or under the reported test speed of 29.93 mph' (emphasis added). The standard requires it to pass a 30 mile per hour rear impact test."

resisting requirements for passive restraints, he said, General Motors relied on deficient research to buttress the argument that a combination of air bags and lap belts was only about 10 percent effective in reducing significant injuries. IIHS analysis of the research revealed that GM had failed to consider the effects of multiple injuries. Reanalyzing the GM data considering multiple injuries in crashes of all directions and types combined, the Institute found the frequency of serious injury about 40 percent less for occupants of air bag-equipped cars.

(He also noted that Institute researchers separately compared results of frontal crashes documented in National Highway Traffic Safety Administration files of vehicles in which front-seat occupants were using no restraints, those in which they were wearing lap/shoulder belts, and those in which they were automatically restrained by air bags. Both active lap/shoulder belts, when worn, and air bags were found to substantially reduce the severity of injuries to front-seat occupants of the full-size and luxury cars whose frontal crashes were the basis of the study. In the more serious frontal crashes the air bag-protected occupants, 83 percent of whom were wearing *no* belts, experienced greater reductions in the average severity of injuries (64 percent) than occupants of such crashes wearing lap/shoulder belts (55 percent). The study also showed that as the severity of the crashes increased, the role of the restraints became more important.)

Haddon's second example of auto industry leaders acting on and communicating misinformation involved an executive's letter to the President of the United States several months ago in which he contended that results of a seat belt use advertising campaign conducted by Motorists Information, Inc., in Detroit indicated "actual safety belt usage can be favorably affected by well conceived advertising . . ." The facts, Haddon said, "lead to exactly the opposite conclusion."

Haddon cited observational surveys by IIHS, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and Motorists Information, Inc., itself, that contradicted the Motorists Information claims. Moreover, an Institute study as late as April of this year showed that "driver belt use in Detroit this spring was 12 percent, non-use 88 percent." (See figure.)



“Surely no chief executive, in considering results of a campaign to increase market penetration, return on investment, or any other more customary aspect of his organization’s activities, would be optimistic over such results,” Haddon observed.

“No doubt, underlying both of the examples cited, the information communicated had been handed up the organizational ladder without knowledge at its destination that it was erroneous, but this in no way lessens the tragedy of basing programs to reduce injury on misinformation, or of not having the correct answers determined and used.”

Copies of Haddon’s remarks, “Quadriplegia and Other Motor Vehicle Injuries: Some Implications and Choices for Motor Vehicle Manufacturers,” may be obtained from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, Watergate 600, Washington, D.C. 20037.

Danish Researchers Urge Passive Restraint Protection

Initial benefits from Denmark’s mandatory seat belt law “vanished” in the second year of the law’s enforcement, a group of Danish researchers reported to the American Association for Automotive Medicine.

An accident analysis group from Odense University in Denmark said the diminished effects of the law, in force since January 1976, probably were due to the “strong influence” of high-risk, non-law-abiding drivers on crash statistics.

“Unfortunately, we have not been able to confirm the predicted beneficial effect of seat belt [law] enforcement,” the researchers said. While their findings were not conclusive, they called the fatality figures “alarming” and said that the seat belt law “as an isolated protective measure is not sufficient.”

According to the report, the law brought observed seat belt use among Denmark’s drivers and front-seat passengers up to 67 percent. However, drivers in their teens and intoxicated motorists were less likely to

(Cont’d on page 8)

Quoted Without Comment

Blair Lee III, acting governor of Maryland, received the following letter from a young Baltimore woman after his recent veto of a bill repealing required wearing of motorcycle helmets (see *Status Report*, Vol. 13, No. 8, June 15, 1978):

Dear Acting Governor Lee:

A while back you vetoed a bill that would have allowed persons riding motorcycles to choose for themselves whether or not to wear a helmet. I, being a person who wholeheartedly believes in personal rights, and I might add, does not like helmets, was very disappointed in your decision.

I believe that as long as one is 18 or older he or she should be able to do as they please, as long as it does not infringe on the rights of others. To me, the government has taken away too many of our personal freedoms already.

Three weeks ago a friend and I were in a motorcycle accident. We are both still in the hospital recuperating. (We got pretty banged up.) If not for your veto, I would not have been wearing a helmet. According to the doctors, if not for the helmets, at 22 years of age we would have been dead.

My opinions on personal freedoms have not changed, but I guess there is a point in which some people need protecting. In other words, thank you for saving my life.

(Name Withheld)

buckle up than older and sober drivers, they said. Calling for supplemental passive protection, the researchers said these “high risk groups influence accident statistics greatly,” seeming to be “less affected by belt enforcement” than the average driver.

The report underlined earlier findings by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety in Ontario. There, observed belt use among teenagers hovered at about 25 percent both before and after passage of a mandatory seat belt law. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 11, No. 10, June 28, 1976.) In recent testimony before Congress, the Institute said that teenagers and drunk drivers “who are disproportionately involved in severe crashes” are a reason for fatalities not declining as much as expected in countries with belt use laws. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 13, No. 8, June 15, 1978.)

The team also confirmed earlier findings at Aarhus University in Denmark, which analyzed reports of 373 persons killed in traffic accidents. In that study, only 27 percent of the fatalities were wearing belts at the time of the crash and only 11 percent of the drunk drivers fatally injured were wearing seat belts. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 13, No. 10, July 14, 1978.)

INJURY RATE CLIMBS AGAIN

There had been a sharp decline in injuries from 1973 to 1974 in Denmark, generally ascribed by researchers to the oil crisis and a new speed limit. In 1976, after passage of the mandatory seat belt law, there was another decline in injuries, but the figures for 1977 showed that the injury rate has climbed back up, almost to 1973 injury levels.

According to the accident data, there was a general rise in belt usage among those injured during daylight hours. Seat belt usage was lowest among those who had been injured at night, with an “over-representation of young, inexperienced, and often intoxicated drivers at those hours.”

The report said that a little less than half of the drivers and front seat passengers injured in crashes were wearing seat belts at the time of the impact. Only 25 percent of teenage drivers and front seat passengers were belt wearers.

“The Effect of Mandatory Seat Belt Legislation on Mortality and Morbidity in Denmark,” by E. L. Nordentoft, T. Kruse, H. V. Nielsen, and R. Weeth was published in the proceedings of the American Association for Automotive Medicine’s 22nd conference.

Tires To Be Graded On Performance

Beginning March 1, 1979, consumers can expect to see a uniform grading system on the bias-ply tires they select, helping them to judge how to get the “best tire for the money,” says the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). Spokesmen for the agency said the tires will be rated on expected tread wear, traction, and temperature resistance.

Rating systems for bias-belted tires will be required by Sept. 1, 1979. Radial tires, which constitute a major share of the market, are not included. The grading system “will be applied to radial ply tires at a later date,” NHTSA stated.

“When this standard goes into effect, the consumer will be better equipped to compare quality and price among competing tire brands,” said Joan Claybrook, administrator of the safety agency under the Department of Transportation.

The announcement caps a more than three-year wait during which the government fought litigation initiated by some domestic tire manufacturers. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 11, No. 15, Sept. 23, 1976.) The *Status Report*

August 3, 1978

producers appealed a Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals decision that substantially upheld the agency's position, but their petition for review was denied by the Supreme Court, enabling NHTSA to go ahead with the final rulemaking.

The new standard will:

- Compare relative tread life. The ratings won't give actual mileage estimates. Instead, a tire rated at "100" would compare to a tire that lasted for 30,000 miles on the government's Texas test course. A tire rated at "150" could be expected to last about 45,000 miles. NHTSA is warning consumers that actual treadwear could vary greatly because of driving habits, maintenance, and climate conditions.
- Give traction ratings of A, B, or C. "A," the top rating, will reflect a tire's performance in straight braking on wet pavement. The agency warned the public that tires with a "low C (traction) grade should be avoided by most drivers, even though the tires may have good grades on tread life and temperature resistance."
- Measure heat resistance with A, B, or C ratings. The "C" rating would indicate that the tire meets the government's existing standard for heat resistance at high speeds, with "A" or "B" ratings assuring even greater resistance to high speed blowouts.

NHTSA Charges Some Firestone Radials Defective

Citing more than 6,000 reports from consumers charging more than 14,000 tire failures, 29 deaths, more than 50 injuries, and hundreds of property damage accidents, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has made a preliminary finding that a safety defect exists in Firestone 500 Steel Belted Radial tires.

NHTSA said it began investigating the tires in February because of hundreds of reports from consumers alleging blowouts, tread separations and chunking, sidewall blisters and cracks, and shape distortion.

In comparison with tires produced by five other major manufacturers in comparable time periods, the agency said the Firestone steel-belted 500's had the highest rate of adjustments – of being returned to dealers by dissatisfied customers in exchange for new tires sold at a reduced price. The comparison showed that the tires' adjustment rate was at least two times greater than that of any of the other tire lines, the agency said, noting that according to Firestone data, more than 1.5 million of the tires already have been adjusted, and more than 15 million are still on the road.

The Firestone-made tires also are sold by Montgomery Ward Co. under the name "Grappler Radial" 8000 series, and by Shell Oil Co. dealers under the name "Super Shell Steel Radial," the agency said.

NHTSA urged Firestone to immediately recall the tires, saying that its investigation has clearly established that they have failed in "significant" numbers, and that the failures have resulted in deaths, injuries, and property damage accidents.

It said it believes that the Firestone steel-belted 500's still on the highway "will continue to fail and that future accidents will occur." The manufacturer will be given a chance to respond to the finding at a public hearing scheduled by the agency for August 7, in room 2230, Department of Transportation headquarters, 400 Seventh St., S.W., Washington, D.C. If after the hearing NHTSA upholds its preliminary defect finding, a recall order could follow.

Firestone has denied that the tires are defective.

GAO Criticizes Delay In Light Truck, Van Safety

A Congressional study has found “unwarranted delays” by the Department of Transportation (DOT) in improving the safety of light trucks and vans, which now are exempt from many major motor vehicle safety standards.

The Department’s National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) “has done little to fully identify the problems or improve the safety” of light trucks and vans, the General Accounting Office (GAO) study contended. The study’s conclusions referred specifically to trucks, buses, and multipurpose passenger vehicles having a gross vehicle weight rating of less than 10,000 pounds.

After being empowered in 1966 to set safety standards for all new motor vehicles, NHTSA has “focused most of its attention on the passenger car,” the GAO said. “Today, most of the established federal motor vehicle safety standards apply to these vehicles, and occupant safety has improved noticeably.”

Among the standards that apply to passenger cars, but not to light trucks and vans, are those governing braking distances, side-door strength, roof crush resistance, impact-absorbing steering columns, interior padding, and head restraints, the study said. It added that safety requirements which have been extended to light trucks and vans are often less strict than those for passenger cars – as in the case of occupant restraint requirements, for example.

LIGHT TRUCK AND VAN FATALITIES CLIMB

One of every four light-duty vehicles built in the U.S. today is a light truck or van, the study reported. As evidence of the safety problem associated with the growing use of the vehicles, the GAO noted that, according to NHTSA, 4,847 occupants of light trucks and vans were killed in 1976 – a 13 percent increase over the 1975 death toll. The GAO also said the vehicles’ occupants face a greater risk of severe injury in collisions than passenger car occupants. The percentage of fatal accidents to total accidents was “consistently higher” for light trucks and vans than for passenger cars in the 7 states which reported such data in 1975, and in the 10 states which reported the data in 1976, the study said.

The study stressed the need for prompt research, saying that while the GAO believes that some of the safety features now required in passenger cars are appropriate for light trucks and vans, others “need to be examined in greater depth to assess their need and the feasibility of applying them” to the vehicles. NHTSA also should identify safety needs unique to the vehicles, the study said.

In addition to calling for expedited research and rulemaking efforts, the study recommended that NHTSA make information available that would alert consumers to safety differences among the various light trucks and vans, and so could “initiate some market pressure on vehicle manufacturers to improve the safety of vehicles.” Buyers “cannot depend on getting complete and accurate safety information from dealers,” the GAO said.

CLAYBROOK: ‘I COMPLETELY AGREE’

In a recent television appearance on the Public Broadcasting Service *MacNeil-Lehrer Report*, NHTSA Administrator Joan Claybrook, responding to the criticism that there have been unwarranted delays by NHTSA and the DOT in improving light truck and van safety, said, “I completely agree with the GAO.” Claybrook noted that she had listed the extension of safety standards to the vehicles as “one of my first priorities” in a speech made a year ago, soon after she took office. She added that NHTSA started work on extending the standards “some time ago,” and hopes to issue “some” proposals in the fall to extend the standards.

In comments responding to the GAO study, the DOT noted that improved light truck and van safety was listed as a major priority in a five-year rulemaking schedule announced by NHTSA last March (see *Status Report*, Vol. 13, No. 4, March 23, 1978). The GAO acknowledged the schedule, but said that "similar plans which were announced in the past have not yet been fulfilled," and that "we see little actual movement" in the direction of actually making safety improvements in the vehicles a top priority. The DOT termed the GAO criticism "unfair," saying that it "disregards extensive planning efforts" reflected in the five-year plan.

(In response to a petition from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, NHTSA said in April it has begun rulemaking action to extend to light trucks and vans safety standards governing passenger car steering systems. See *Status Report*, Vol. 13, No. 6, May 8, 1978. The standards require that automobiles be equipped with energy-absorbing steering assemblies, and that the rearward displacement of steering columns be limited in frontal collisions. Both standards are intended to reduce the likelihood of chest, neck, and head injuries to drivers.)

Copies of "Unwarranted Delays by the Department of Transportation to Improve Light Truck Safety," Report No. CED-78-119, July 1978, by the U.S. Comptroller General, may be obtained from the General Accounting Office, Distribution Section, P. O. Box 1020, Washington, D.C. 20013. Single copies are free and additional copies cost \$1.00 each.

Massachusetts Motorcycle Helmet Law Repeal Vetoed By Dukakis

Noting that the data from other states are "quite clear in showing that deaths and serious injuries from motorcycle accidents have increased spectacularly" as soon as motorcycle helmet use laws are repealed, Massachusetts Gov. Mike Dukakis has vetoed a repeal bill in his state.

In a veto message to the state legislature, Dukakis cited both Connecticut and National Highway Traffic Safety Administration figures (see *Status Report*, Vol. 13, No. 6, May 8, 1978). "In my opinion," he said, "these chilling statistics clearly outweigh any philosophical arguments that center around each person's presumed right to decide for himself how much risk to life or limb he will take. Such arguments fade into abstraction when measured against the very real tragedy that afflicts the family of each person who dies unnecessarily."

Saying he was "not about to take a step backward," the governor vetoed the law that would have permitted motorcycle operators over the age of 18 to go helmetless. The legislature sustained the veto before it adjourned for the summer, a spokesman said.

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