

After Delays, U.S. Takes a Step Forward on Rearview Cameras in Vehicles

By JACLYN TROP, The New York Times Published: September 25, 2013

DETROIT — To help prevent the deaths of children hit by cars that are backing up, the Transportation Department said Tuesday that it would add rearview cameras to its list of recommended safety measures.

The recommendation, though, fell short of a law passed by Congress in 2008 requiring that the department set standards for rear visibility. And it comes as a lawsuit by a consortium of safety advocates, to be filed Wednesday, claims that the department has taken more than twice as long to issue rules than the law intended.

The department has delayed its final ruling four times since the law took effect in 2008. It was to set visibility standards that could help prevent accidents while in reverse, including the installation of devices like cameras, mirrors or sensors.

The Transportation Department, which made the announcement through the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, declined Tuesday evening to comment on the lawsuit.

The department recommends that the cameras cover a 20-foot by 10-foot area directly behind the vehicle, displaying the image within two seconds after the car is put in reverse and that it be large enough to help the driver see what is behind the car.

“As we’ve seen with other features in the past, adding rearview video systems to our list of recommended safety features will encourage both automakers and consumers to consider more vehicles that offer this important technology,” Anthony R. Foxx, the Transportation secretary, said in a statement. “While adding this technology to our list of safety features is important, I remain committed to implementing the rear visibility rule as well.”

But Greg Gulbransen, who accidentally killed his 2-year-old son in 2002 when backing the family’s sport utility vehicle into their driveway, said the agency’s delay in issuing a mandate was costing more lives each year.

“Children are dying,” Mr. Gulbransen said. “Children are being seriously injured.”

Mr. Gulbransen is one of the plaintiffs in the suit, along with Susan Auriemma, who injured her 3-year-old daughter in 2005 when backing in her driveway in Manhasset, N.Y. Three consumer advocacy groups — Kids and Cars Inc., Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, and Consumers Union — are also plaintiffs. Public Citizen, which is representing the plaintiffs, declined to comment on the Transportation Department’s announcement.

The lawsuit, to be filed with the federal Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit in New York, asks the court to order the transportation agency to issue a final ruling within 90 days.

On average, backover accidents kill 292 people and injure 18,000 annually, according to the Transportation Department. Children under 5 years old account for 44 percent of these deaths.

In more than 70 percent of these deaths, a parent or close relative is driving when the accident occurs, the agency said.

The 2008 law, called the Cameron Gulbransen Kids Transportation Safety Act, stems from the death of Mr. Gulbransen’s son in Syosset, N.Y. The law required the transportation agency to revise the safety standard to expand the area that drivers must be able to see behind their vehicles and to set a three-year deadline.

But the 2011 deadline for a final ruling has been delayed four times, according to the lawsuit. A draft of the final rule sent to the White House in November 2011 was delayed and finally withdrawn from review in June, when the transportation agency said it needed more time.

The department then set a deadline for Jan. 2, 2015, which the lawsuit says would more than double the three-year timetable the law outlines. The agency said it needed more time to collect information.

“This is the fourth delay, and the longest one they’ve offered up,” Ms. Auriemma said. “It’s made me lose faith in the process of what’s supposed to happen.”

Many automakers already install rearview cameras as standard features in their vehicles. Almost 80 percent of 2013 models include a rearview camera as either an optional or standard safety feature, compared with 1 percent in 2003, according to Edmunds.com, an industry researcher.

Even more 2014 models will have the option of a rearview camera as redesigned cars come with full navigation screens.

Automakers say that it is important that rearview cameras remain optional so that consumers can choose whether to pay extra for the feature. Automakers also say they must balance safety features with competitive prices.

Other options, automakers say, include installing backup sensors that beep when a person or object is directly behind the car.

The Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, a Washington-based trade association that represents 12 automakers, said the decision to buy a rearview camera should be left to consumers.

“Consumers today are very safety savvy, and they have much information online to help them choose how best to spend their safety dollars,” said a spokesman, Wade Newton.

Automakers opposing the mandate to install rearview cameras in all new vehicles say installation could cost \$2.7 billion annually and that, at \$160 to \$200 per vehicle, the cost will get passed on to consumers.

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