

U.S. Rule Set for Cameras at Cars' Rear

By NICK BUNKLEY, The New York Times Published: February 27, 2012

Fabrizio Costantini for The New York Times Consumer safety advocates say that requiring a rearview camera in automobiles is a big step in protecting people outside of a vehicle.



On average, two children die and about 50 are injured every week when someone accidentally backs over them in a vehicle, according to KidsAndCars.org, a nonprofit group that pushed the government to begin tracking such tragedies. And more than two-thirds of the time, a parent or other close relative is behind the wheel.



Fabrizio Costantini for The New York Times
A rearview camera monitor in a Kia Sorento.

Now, auto safety regulators have decided to do something about it. Federal regulators plan to announce this week that automakers will be required to put rearview cameras in all passenger vehicles by 2014 to help drivers see what is

behind them. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, which proposed the mandate in late 2010, is expected to send a final version of the rule to Congress on Wednesday.

Cars are filled with safety features that have been mandated by government regulators over the years, including air bags and the Liddy Light, the third brake light named for Elizabeth Dole, who made it standard as secretary of transportation in the 1980s.

But the rearview camera requirement is one of the biggest steps taken to protect people outside of a vehicle.

“We haven’t done anything else to protect pedestrians,” said Clarence Ditlow, executive director of the Center for Auto Safety in Washington. “This is one thing we can do and should do.”

A spokeswoman for the highway traffic safety agency declined to comment before the new rule was announced. However, in a preliminary version circulated for public comment, regulators predicted that adding the cameras and viewing screens will cost the auto industry as much as \$2.7 billion a year, or \$160 to \$200 a vehicle. At least some of the cost is expected to be passed on to consumers through higher prices.

But regulators say that 95 to 112 deaths and as many as 8,374 injuries could be avoided each year by eliminating the wide blind spot behind a vehicle. Government statistics indicate that 228 people of all ages — 44 percent of whom are under age 5 — die every year in backover accidents involving passenger vehicles. About 17,000 people a year are injured in such accidents.

“In terms of absolute numbers of lives saved, it certainly isn’t the highest,” Mr. Ditlow said. “But in terms of emotional tragedy, backover deaths are some of the worst imaginable. When you have a parent that kills a child in an incident that’s utterly avoidable, they don’t ever forget it.”

Automakers began offering backup cameras only about a decade ago, by using the in-dash navigation screens that had become popular on luxury models. The feature has become increasingly popular as companies found more inexpensive ways to display camera images to a driver, such as on a screen hidden in the rearview mirror. For the 2012 model year, 45 percent of vehicles offer a rearview camera as standard equipment, according to the automotive research Web site Edmunds.com. It is an optional feature on 23 percent of models.

Safety advocates said a mandatory camera is long overdue. “We wouldn’t buy a car if we couldn’t see 30 or 40 feet going forward,” said Janette Fennell, the founder of KidsAndCars.org. “We’re taking this big lethal weapon going in reverse, and we can’t see.”

The new requirement stems from a 2008 law, the Cameron Gulbransen Kids Transportation Safety Act, named for a 2-year-old boy who died in 2002 when his pediatrician father was backing a sport utility vehicle into their driveway. The law required the N.H.T.S.A. to set standards for rear visibility, which had never been regulated.

In urging Congress to help reduce backover injuries, KidsAndCars created a public-service announcement showing that 62 children could fit behind a large S.U.V. without being visible to the driver in any of the mirrors. Although they account for a small fraction of the deaths that result from automobile crashes, backovers are the most common cause of off-road deaths involving children and vehicles, according to KidsAndCars. The number of reported child fatalities attributed to backovers totaled 448 in the years 2006 through 2010, a sharp increase from 88 in a four-year period a decade earlier, the group said.

In many cases, the incidents involve a phenomenon that safety advocates call “bye-bye syndrome,” when a child runs outside to wave to someone driving away, without that person’s knowledge.

As vehicles have become larger and designed to better protect occupants, drivers’ ability to see any people or objects behind them has been reduced, said Dan Edmunds, director of vehicle testing at Edmunds.com.

“Over time, the beltlines have risen, and the glass has gotten a little smaller in the interest of safety,” Mr. Edmunds said. “There’s certainly been a lot of attention paid to safety, but visibility hasn’t necessarily been lumped in the same way.”

Edmunds now measures the size of the blind spot behind each new vehicle, based on how far back the driver can see a mannequin designed to resemble a small child. Although many backover incidents involve S.U.V.’s and trucks, Mr. Edmunds said some of the biggest blind spots are on passenger cars where the trunk has a high deck lid and the driver sits low to the ground.

For the Cadillac CTS-V coupe, Edmunds measured a blind spot 101 feet long, compared with about 40 feet for minivans from Toyota and Honda.

Automakers have generally supported the requirement, while some took issue with technical aspects of the proposal and the added cost. “We’ve had longstanding support for efforts to increase the field of view for these vehicles,” said Wade Newton, of the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers.

Meanwhile, in anticipation of the 2014 mandate, automakers have been designing models with camera systems in mind. Instead of including a camera in a \$2,000 navigation package, many have made it standard or a stand-alone option for a few hundred dollars.

When Honda revamped its CR-V crossover vehicle last year, it included a backup camera as standard equipment. On the 2011 model, CR-V buyers who wanted a camera had to buy the top-of-the-line EX-L trim with a navigation system, which cost \$7,000 more than the base model.

Regulators studied other ways of improving rear visibility, including the beeping radar-based sensors that many vehicles already offer. But they determined that the sensors often did not detect moving people, especially children. Drivers also responded better to the camera image than the audio alerts, they said.

“Video camera-based systems are by far the most comprehensive and cost-effective currently available solution for reducing backover crashes, fatalities and injuries,” the N.H.T.S.A. said.

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