



ADVOCATES
FOR HIGHWAY
AND AUTO SAFETY



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Lawmakers Must Keep Life-Saving Auto Safety Improvements in Highway Bill, Public Safety Groups, Survivor Advocates Say

House-Senate Conferees Could Finish Work on Bill as Early as This Week

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Public safety groups and people who have lost loved ones in vehicle-related tragedies today called on lawmakers to ensure that provisions key to curbing vehicle-related deaths and injuries are included in the highway bill, which is to be completed as early as this week.

A House-Senate conference committee is currently working on the bill, H.R. 3, the Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users. The Senate-passed version includes provisions to ensure that future vehicles have life-saving improvements such as stronger roofs, electronic stability control, side window glazing and side head air bags. The bill also calls for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to study the problems of children being backed over inadvertently and being injured by power windows. The U.S. House of Representatives highway bill, however, contains none of these provisions because it does not have a commerce title.

Thousands of deaths and severe injuries caused annually by rollovers, ejections, side-impact crashes, backovers and power windows could be avoided with the installation in every vehicle of critical safeguards called for in the legislation by specific dates. Although House Energy and Commerce Committee Chair Rep. Joe Barton (R-Texas) has suggested putting the provisions in a separate bill in the fall, Senate conferees have made it clear that this is not a viable option because of the Senate's full schedule. Barton and other conference committee members are key to allowing these proposals to be enacted.

The last time lawmakers passed auto safety legislation was in 2000, when the House and Senate Commerce committees took a leadership role in quickly passing legislation to address the Firestone tragedies, in which defective tires and rollover-prone vehicles caused hundreds of deaths and injuries, with 25 percent of the deaths occurring in Texas. The pending safety provisions deal with problems that lawmakers didn't have time to address in 2000 and would alleviate the dangers that caused the Firestone situation, including rollover-prone vehicles, people being ejected too easily from vehicles and flimsy roofs that crush in rollovers.

Lawmakers have a golden opportunity to dramatically improve vehicle safety, said Public Citizen President Joan Claybrook. They have an obligation to the country to enact these critical and long-overdue provisions.

Inaction is unacceptable, said Judith Lee Stone, president of Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, especially when so many lives hang in the balance.

It is imperative to pass this bill immediately, said Janette Fennell, founder of Kids And Cars. Our children are being killed by preventable tragedies in unprecedented numbers. Kids And Cars has recorded a dramatic spike in the number of children being killed and injured in non-traffic, non-crash events this year. Congress needs to end these unthinkable deaths. We cannot wait another minute; the time is now."

Added Sally Greenberg, senior product safety counsel for Consumers Union, Auto safety isn't a red state or blue state issue. It's a red, white and blue issue, and this bill will save lives in every city and town in America. This is a no-brainer. Congress should pass this bipartisan bill.

The latest figures available from NHTSA project that 42,800 people were killed in vehicle crashes in 2004, a year that saw a 6.9 percent jump in sport utility vehicle rollover fatalities over the previous year. At the current level of fatalities, an estimated 212,500 lives will be lost on the nation's highways and 15 million will be injured, costing society more than \$1 trillion over the life of the five-year bill.

Every safety issue included in the bill is supported by strong data and proven research, and technologies are available to address the problems. Rollover and side impact deaths represent more than 40 percent of all highway deaths each year. There is an urgent need for NHTSA to issue rules to solve these long-pending safety problems, and this legislation will compel the agency to act. The bill calls for:

- **Rollover prevention:** Studies estimate that electronic stability control or rollover stability control reduces deaths and injuries by as much as one-third by preventing crashes from occurring and could save as many as 2,100 lives a year in rollover crashes alone. NHTSA and automakers have acknowledged the overwhelming benefits of some of these technologies.
- **A new roof crush resistance standard:** At least 1,400 deaths and 2,300 severe injuries, including paraplegia and quadriplegia, could be prevented each year by improving the weak standard, which has not been updated since 1971. Additional lives could be saved in rollover crashes with rollover sensors to trigger side impact air bags and seat belt pretensioners.
- **Occupant ejection prevention:** The bill includes a requirement to issue performance standards to reduce complete or partial ejection of vehicle occupants. This includes an upgrade to the door locks and latches standard, which could help prevent hundreds of the 2,500 door related ejection deaths each year.
- **Improved side impact crash protection:** An estimated 1,200 lives could be saved and 975 serious head injuries could be prevented each year by requiring technology already used in high-end vehicles to be used in all cars and light trucks, and even more if also equipped with rollover sensors.
- **Backover technology study:** The bill requires NHTSA to evaluate backover prevention technology.
- **Non-traffic data collection:** The bill requires data collection on vehicle-related non-traffic incidents.
- **Effective safety belt use reminders in all seats:** Increasing the effectiveness of belt reminders, already mandatory in all vehicles, could save up to 900 lives each year.

Julie and Smith Peck of Marietta, Ga., flew to Washington, D.C., to call on Congress to enact the provisions. Their 4-year old son, Jackson, was killed on Dec. 23, 2004, when his grandmother accidentally ran over him while backing up her car.

My husband and I aren't blaming anyone, Julie Peck said. But just as shotguns need a lock on them around children, this vehicle safety deficiency needs to be addressed by Congress. We need a device to help us see behind our cars when backing up and pulling out. Jackson was a wonderful boy. We honor him by coming to Washington. We urge Congress to pay attention to these incidents and to hear our plea.

Rachel Clemens, of Garland, Texas, echoed the call for Congress to act. Her 2-year-old daughter, Adrianna, was killed Oct. 9, 2004, after being inadvertently backed over by her father.

Before [the tragedy], I had assumed that our lawmakers and safety officials were doing all they could to ensure the safety of our families, Clemens said. Unfortunately, I was wrong. But now is their chance to get it right. This highway bill can help stop this epidemic American families are experiencing.

The safety measures have bipartisan support. U.S. Sens. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska), Trent Lott (R-Miss.), Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii), Olympia Snowe (R-Maine) and John Rockefeller (D-W. Va.) have been notable champions of the safety provisions in their leadership roles on the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, as has Sen. Mike DeWine (R-Ohio), who is not on the committee. The committee unanimously approved the auto safety section of the legislation on April 14. The full Senate approved H.R. 3 on May 17.

We want to join with other safety advocates today in urging the transportation bill conferees to include a number of critical safety standards in the final version of H.R. 3, said Alan Maness, associate general counsel for State Farm Insurance Companies. State Farm supports this legislation. It is an important step in advancing auto safety.

Said Howard Champion, MD, president of the Coalition for American Trauma Care, If lawmakers could spend 24 hours in a trauma center and see the motor vehicle injuries trauma teams deal with every day, I don't think they would hesitate to enact the Senate bill's safety provisions as soon as possible. They would do everything possible to prevent these injuries and deaths now.

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