

US urges safety technologies be made standard (Update 2)

November 14 2012, by Joan Lowy

The U.S. government should require automakers to make the latest collision prevention technologies standard equipment on all new cars and trucks, a move that could reduce fatal highway accidents by more than half, federal accident investigators said Wednesday.

The technologies include lane departure warning, forward collision warning, adaptive cruise control, automatic braking and electronic stability control. They are available on many cars and trucks already, although some are limited primarily to higher-end models. The National Transportation Safety Board said they should be required on all vehicles, despite the auto industry's concern that doing so would add thousands of dollars to the cost of a new car.

Such technologies can prevent accidents that involve running off the road, rear-ending another vehicle and lane-change maneuvers, the board said. Those types of accidents account for 60 percent of fatal highway accidents. There were more than 32,000 traffic deaths in the U.S. last year.

The Obama administration "should establish performance standards where still needed and mandate that these technologies be included as standard equipment in cars and commercial vehicles alike," the board said in a statement. "With such promising potential to improve highway safety, this technology should be robustly deployed throughout the passenger and commercial fleets."

Electronic stability control, which automatically applies brakes to individual wheels to restore control, is already required for new passenger vehicles weighing less than 10,000 pounds (4,535 kilograms). But large pickup trucks, 15-passenger vans and commercial trucks that exceed that weight aren't included in the requirement.

Lane departure warnings alert drivers when a car wanders into another lane without signaling. Adaptive cruise control uses sensors to read traffic conditions and modulate the throttle and brakes to keep the car a safe distance from the vehicle in front of it. Forward collision warning systems monitor the roadway in front of the car and warn the driver of an impending collision. Some forward-collision systems will apply the brakes if the driver doesn't take action to avoid an imminent collision. Similarly, automatic braking applies brakes to avoid an impending collision with another vehicle, person or obstacle.

The board's recommendation also includes tire-pressure monitoring systems and speed-limiting technology for commercial trucks.

The board included the recommendation as part of its annual list of "10 most wanted" safety improvements. Some of the technologies were on the list in 2008, and the board previously has made piecemeal recommendations to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration that it set performance standards for some of the technologies or require manufacturers include them in some vehicles.

But this is the first time the board is telling regulators and automakers that this new generation of technologies should be required on all vehicles, safety advocates said.

"What they are recommending is a safety system for cars where you have a multitude of things that cooperate together to dramatically improve safety in a vehicle," said Clarence Ditlow, executive director of

the Center for Auto Safety, a consumer advocacy group.

The recommendation got a chilly reception from automakers, which said it could drive up the cost of a new car.

Systems that warn drivers of an impending collision but don't automatically brake cost about \$1,000 to \$3,000 per vehicle depending on the features, according government estimates cited by the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers. Systems that both warn the driver of an impending collision and apply the brakes if the driver doesn't act first, cost about \$3,500, the alliance said.

"Automakers see great promise from their driver-assist technologies, and we are urging consumers to check them out, but the choice to purchase one or more belongs to consumers," said Gloria Bergquist, vice president of the alliance.

"In this still-fragile economy, maintaining affordability of new vehicles remains a concern," she said. "Today, the average price of a new vehicle is \$30,000, more than half the median income in the U.S."

If the safety technologies were standard on all vehicles, their cost per vehicle would come down, safety advocates said.

"Some of this technology can be done for literally just a few dollars," said NTSB board member Robert Sumwalt. "I don't think we're talking about adding thousands of dollars to a car."

That's because many of the safety features rely on the same electronic sensors and computers.

"While it sounds like a lot of items, basically you are taking advantage of the sophisticated electronics in all modern automobiles," Ditlow said.

"Why limit major safety improvements to a few primarily luxury models? The entire public deserves them."

This year's most-wanted list also includes a recommendation that states and regulators ban nonessential use of cellphones and other distracting portable electronic devices by operators across all modes of transportation—cars and trucks, planes, trains and vessels.

The board said it has investigated numerous accidents and incidents in which operators were so engrossed in their devices that they lost awareness of their situation. As part of the recommendation, the board urged device manufacturers to perfect technology that disables cellphones and other devices when they are within reach of an operator while the car, truck, plane, train or vessel is in operation.

US lists most-wanted safety improvements

What's on the National Transportation Safety Board's annual list of its 10 most-wanted safety improvements released Wednesday?

Recommendations include requiring collision-prevention technologies as standard equipment on all cars and trucks, eliminating the use of cellphones and other distracting technologies by operators of all kinds of transportation, and improving the safety of interstate bus operations.

VEHICLE COLLISION PREVENTION

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration should require manufacturers to include an array of collision-prevention technologies on all new cars and trucks. That includes lane departure warning, forward-collision warning, adaptive cruise control, automatic braking and electronic stability control.

OPERATOR DISTRACTIONS

States and regulators should ban nonessential use of cellphones and other distracting devices by operators of cars, trucks, buses, planes, trains and vessels. Companies should develop and vigorously enforce policies to eliminate distractions to their operators. Device manufacturers should assist by developing technology that disables devices when they're within reach of operators.

SUBSTANCE-IMPAIRED DRIVING

A comprehensive solution is required. Technology such as ignition interlocks and continuous alcohol-monitoring devices can prevent impaired drivers from getting behind the wheel. Developing new technology that can quickly and effectively test drivers for drugs is critical.

AIRPORT RUNWAYS

Use technologies that provide pilots with better situational awareness such as cockpit "moving maps"—computer screens that show the movements of other planes and equipment on runways and tarmacs. Runway status lights that show pilots when a runway is available can help, too. Air traffic controllers can provide pilots with more information such as maximum winds that may be encountered on takeoff or landing.

GENERAL AVIATION

While the number of airline accidents has dropped, the board continues to investigate about 1,500 accidents a year involving mostly private pilots. Efforts should be made to improve pilot knowledge, skills and recurrent flight training. Knowledge tests and flight reviews should test awareness of weather, use of instruments and use of more sophisticated computerized cockpit displays.

INTERCITY BUSES

Bus companies should do more to make sure their drivers are qualified. Drivers should have regular medical exams by authorized doctors. New bus companies should be required to demonstrate their fitness before the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration grants them authority to operate.

AGING TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE

The government doesn't provide sufficient inspector guidance for the owners and inspectors of the nation's 600,000 bridges. The Federal Highway Administration should ensure bridge inspector training is comprehensive and consistent across the country so that no issues are overlooked. There should be a national inspection standard that raises the bar for bridge and roadway integrity.

PIPELINES

The government should improve its oversight of the pipeline industry. Pipeline operators should be routinely evaluated according to effective performance-based standards. Federal and state oversight agencies should work together to identify deficiencies. There should be drug and alcohol testing of employees when an accident occurs.

POSITIVE TRAIN CONTROL

Railroads and other train operators should put train control systems in place that slow or stop a train that doesn't obey signaling systems. Congress ordered the systems be put in place by 2015, but 10,000 miles (16,000 kilometers) of track were exempted from the mandate.

FIRE PREVENTION AND SUPPRESSION

More can be done to detect or suppress fire across all modes of transportation. Fire detection devices could be installed in engine rooms of ferries and other passenger vessels to provide an early warning to the crew. Intercity buses that monitor the temperatures in the wheel wells could prevent an impending tire fire. Fire suppression systems in the cargo compartments or contains of cargo aircraft can lessen the threat.

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