

Gov't to announce new safety relationship with automakers

January 12 2016, by Tom Krisher And Joan Lowy

Using the aviation industry as a model, automakers have agreed to work on fundamental changes in their relationship with the U.S. government in order to spot safety trends before they become problems and get new technology to the marketplace faster, a top safety regulator and a person familiar with the discussions said Tuesday.

The process of issuing government regulations to correct safety problems takes too many years, Mark Rosekind, head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, told reporters at the Automotive News World Congress in Detroit. By the time the regulations are issued, changes in technology make them out of date, he said.

Rosekind alluded to the possibility that the auto industry will agree to safety culture changes and technology voluntarily rather than waiting for the arduous government rule-making process. He said that Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx gave him a mandate to identify barriers in regulations and other areas that prevent new life-saving technology from going into cars quickly, and then figure out how to remove barriers to move faster.

Federal officials are grappling with how to get new technology such as vehicle-to-vehicle communications, also called V2V, and self-driving cars into the marketplace. V2V involves cars using wireless communications to send information like speed and direction to surrounding cars. Cars can warn drivers of an impending collision or brake to prevent a collision before the driver has even seen the other

vehicle.

Features such as automatic emergency braking that are the building blocks of self-driving cars are already available in some, mostly higher-priced car models. Auto safety advocates have been urging the government to set standards for such technology. They say that if one manufacturer's cars can successfully brake to prevent or mitigate a frontal collision at up to 35 mph, another manufacturer's system shouldn't work only up to 25 mph.

Rosekind used spreading automatic emergency braking to even the lowest-cost new cars as an example of the kind of problem changing the government's relationship with automakers might help address. He asked his staff how long it would take to make a government rule requiring all vehicles to do this, and was told up to eight years. Rosekind has been negotiating with the industry and has an agreement with more than 10 automakers to put the technology on all models, he said.

"If you can beat eight years by one year, two years, anything you do, I will translate for you into how many lives get saved, injuries prevented and crashes deleted. That's what we're after," Rosekind said.

Rosekind on Friday will announce that 12 automakers have signed on to an agreement to increase the percentage of recalls that are being completed and to be more proactive in preventing and reporting safety defects, according to a person who has read the agreement. The agreement could include an advertising campaign funded by the industry, said the person, who didn't want to be identified because the deal hasn't been formally announced.

Currently the average completion rate 1 1/2 years after a recall begins is 75 percent, but some recalls such as the exploding Takata air bag inflators have far lower rates.

Rosekind gave few details on the agreement but said people would see "actions going forward that change the culture of the industry."

Discussions on working out a new relationship grew out of a meeting Foxx had with automakers in Washington in early December. Foxx told reporters just before Christmas that he hoped to announce a new effort to improve the safety culture of the auto industry based on a management philosophy known as Safety Management Systems, or SMS. The Federal Aviation Administration has promoted the philosophy and it's in use at most airlines today.

SMS involves more openness and collaboration between government and industry to identify safety risks before they become problems.

"That's the model I would use," Foxx told reporters. "A model that relies on a lot of sharing of information in an identifiable way to a particular carrier or industry stakeholder but that allows us together to isolate where risk exists and to eliminate that risk before a problem emerges."

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Citation: Gov't to announce new safety relationship with automakers (2016, January 12) retrieved 20 March 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-01-govt-safety-relationship-automakers.html>

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