

STATEMENT OF BROCK ADAMS, SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION, BEFORE THE CONSUMER SUBCOMMITTEE OF THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION, THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER, 8, 1977.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

It is a pleasure to participate in today's hearing on improved crash protection for passenger car occupants.

For all of its benefits, the motor vehicle is costing our nation 46,000 lives a year, an average of 126 persons killed every day in traffic accidents. These are -- or should be -- frightening, distressing numbers. Unfortunately, we seem to have become hardened to traffic accident statistics, resigned to the idea that the freedom to drive the highways carries with it the freedom to play fast and loose with our lives or those of others.

Some risk, certainly, is unavoidable. But the stakes are getting higher. If present trends continue and no new safety measures are adopted, the Department's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that total motor vehicle fatalities will increase by 1990 to 66,670, or 183 deaths per day.

We could cut those losses -- save lives, reduce the severity of injuries and lower the incidence of personal grief and human misery -- by the simple expedient of requiring passive restraint systems in our motorcars. Yet we have procrastinated in coping with motor vehicle deaths, counting the speculative dollar costs of prevention rather than the whole life benefits mandatory passive restraint systems can deliver.

With highway speeds again creeping up, despite the 55 mile per hour speed limit, with more cars and drivers on our roads each year, and with fuel efficiency requirements dictating annual increases in the numbers of

smaller, lighter cars on the highways, the safety of the motoring public takes on increasingly greater importance. Under those circumstances it is my judgment that we have too long ignored a lifesaving system of technical merit and proven potential. It is now eight years since automatic occupant crash protection was first considered. Millions of dollars have been spent and much testing has been accomplished during those years, to the point where we can now go forward with confidence that while passive restraints may not be the ultimate safeguard they will be a major force in saving lives and retarding injuries.

It is time to move ahead with the implementation phase. The issue has remained unresolved too long. Too many people have been needlessly injured or killed in crashes where passive restraints could have saved them or lessened their injuries. I suggest that in good conscience we can no longer be party to further delay. We can no longer afford to be passive about passive restraints, or relegate safety to an option list somewhere on a par with stereo radios or vinyl roofs in importance.

As a Congressman in 1966, I joined with you in enacting the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act, which directs all reasonable steps be taken to reduce the deaths and injuries that occur needlessly on our nation's highways. This legislation has been successful in reducing the rate of fatalities and injuries per mile driven, but our larger objective -- a meaningful reduction in the absolute numbers of the dead and injured -- has remained an elusive goal.

We have seen some tangible safety benefits as a result of the lower national speed limit, and that is a positive achievement that must be encouraged.

But it is not enough to nibble away at the scourge of death and destruction afflicting our predominant means of transportation. The costs in individual tragedy and social loss are high. The costs of prevention, by comparison, are small.

To date we have depended on people taking prudent action to safeguard themselves. We know that a substantial percentage of highway accident deaths and injuries can be averted by adequately restraining vehicle occupants against ejection or harsh impact with the vehicle interior and that belts are available in most automobiles to provide that restraint. Unfortunately most of them go unused. A very recent DOT survey of more than 50,000 cars shows less than 20-percent belt use in 1977-model cars.<sup>1</sup>

This problem can be attacked in one of two ways. One is the enactment of State laws that require occupants to buckle up each time they use their cars. The other is the installation of passive restraints in all new cars to provide protection automatically, much as the padded dashboard and collapsible steering column already do.

Based on years of research and an eight-year rulemaking record, I proposed consideration be given to each of these solutions last March. I chaired a public hearing on the matter and considered the views of all parties who cared to comment. I concluded that enactment of mandatory "buckle up" laws in all the States is unlikely. An attempt to impose such laws on citizens by the Federal government would create difficulties in Federal-State relations. Moreover, the attempt could damage rather than

<sup>1</sup>DOT-HS-6-01340 Safety Belt Usage Survey.

further the interests of highway safety in the long term. This conclusion should not be construed as detracting from my advocacy of belt use on a voluntary basis, or from my support for enactment of belt use laws by the States on their initiatives.

Neither do I believe that the 20 percent or so of the driving population who now use belts would abandon them when passive restraints are available. Those who use seat belts today obviously believe in them and we must continue our educational efforts to win more converts. But in terms of saving lives, passive restraints are most effective in frontal collisions, where 55 percent of fatalities occur. On that basis alone, the merits of automatic crash protection are -- in my opinion -- persuasive.

On June 30th, therefore, I issued a decision to require the installation of passive restraint systems -- in the largest passenger cars in model year 1982, in both large and intermediate-sized passenger cars in model year 1983, and in all passenger cars in model year 1984 and thereafter. When installed in most passenger cars passive restraints will annually save, we estimate, at least 9,000 lives beyond those already saved by voluntary belt use. The chart attached to my written statement shows the lives that will be saved by passive restraints when installed in all passenger cars. No other foreseeable improvement in the construction of automobiles offers such significant savings. Unlike the imposition of "buckle up" laws, automatic crash protection won't interfere with the consumer's habits.

I considered at length concerns expressed about the cost, environmental and economic impact, possible adverse side effects, and other factors involved in installing these systems. I am satisfied that these effects are manageable and are justified by the achievable savings in life and prevented injury.

I will be happy to explain my conclusions about any of these effects at the conclusion of my statement.

In the future, we must make certain that the manufacturers produce automobiles whose characteristics meet broadly defined societal goals in safety and other areas. Reduction in vehicle size, for example, will result from the President's national energy plan and implementation of the Energy Policy and Conservation Act. The introduction of smaller passenger cars on the highway makes it doubly important that the Federal government take reasonable safety countermeasures. When I established automotive fuel economy levels for the early 1980's, I also reached the decision that passive restraint systems should be installed in future passenger cars to upgrade occupant protection.

To ensure the orderly implementation of this safety measure in coordination with the design changes for fuel economy and emissions improvements, the effective date for passive protection provides a four-year lead time and gradual implementation in three stages. This schedule is consistent with the lead time estimates of the auto industry and will minimize the effects of the decision on the nation's economy. It also permits installations in those vehicles where the technologies are most fully-developed and tested. As for employment effects; the Department projects a negligible loss in jobs in the first year of the mandate based on "worst case" assumptions. The United Auto Workers Union supports the passive restraint decision as a beneficial safety advance for the nation.

Other support for the passive protection standard has been voiced by the National Transportation Safety Board, the National Motor Vehicle Safety

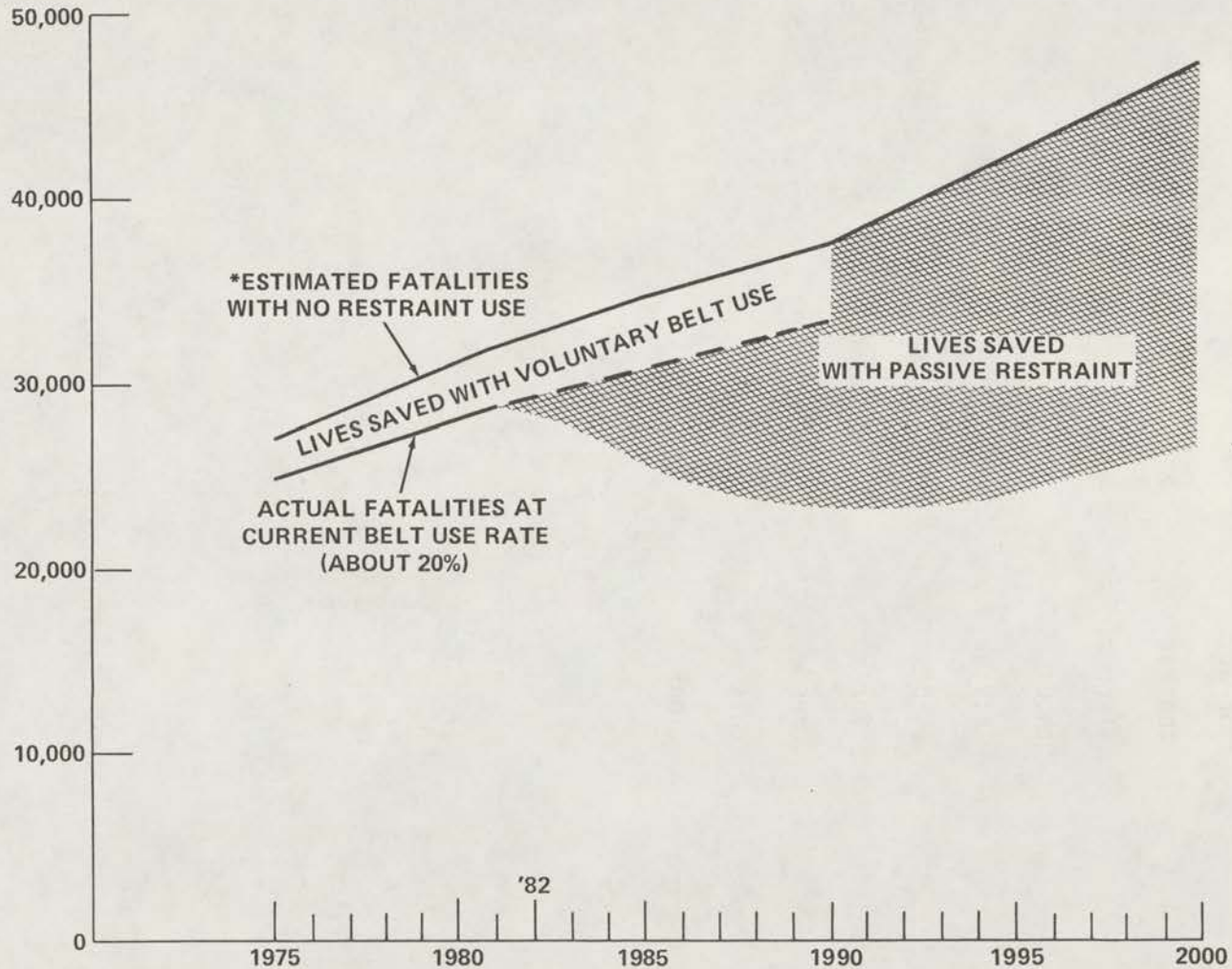
Advisory Council, the American Automobile Association, the Council on Wage and Price Stability, the International Association of Chiefs of Police, and the major automobile insurance companies.

Enactment of the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act signalled a national commitment to technological solutions to our auto safety problems without awaiting their slow evolution in the marketplace. While some persons advocate waiting until the marketplace generates safety improvements such as passive restraints, I believe the record shows that Congress must push for the types of emissions, fuel economy, and safety advances so sorely needed by our nation in the 1980's.

Mr. Chairman this concludes my prepared testimony. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.

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FATALITIES IN PASSENGER CARS (FRONT SEAT)



\*Safety Panel Report - Motor Vehicle Goals Study (Nov. 1976, P. 1.0)