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Good morning ... It's often said that one of the shortcomings of government is that there is no bottom line on which to measure effectiveness of programs and the expenditure of taxpayers dollars. But when it comes to highway safety, there is most certainly a bottom line. As the "CEO" of the Department of Transportation, I am pleased to announce some extremely impressive news to the shareholders of this country -- the American public.

The traffic fatality rate -- expressed as number of deaths per 100 million miles of travel -- is the commonly accepted barometer of how well we, as a nation, are doing in highway safety. We are now projecting that the traffic fatality rate for 1992 will be 1.8 deaths -- the lowest in history. (Point to Chart)

Just a decade ago, the rate was 2.8 deaths. The bottom line here is that the public today is at less risk on the road. If the 1982 rate had remained unchanged, an additional 22,000 people would have died in 1992. In addition, we estimate that the 1992 motor vehicle fatality toll -- the actual number of people killed on our roads this year -- will be 39,500. This is the first time in 30 years (since 1963) that the number has dipped below the 40,000 mark.

Certainly a major factor in these remarkable improvements in public safety is the big boost we have seen in the number of Americans using safety belts. Last year, we reported that national belt use increased to 59 percent.

Today, I am pleased to announce that a weighted average of state surveys shows that national usage is 62 percent. Once again, there is a bottom line: Sixty-two percent belt use nationwide means that this year some 5,500 lives were saved because people buckled up.

Fourteen states (identified on the charts) have exceeded 70 percent belt usage, compared to only one state in 1990. Twenty-two states and the District of Columbia reported increases of 10 or more percentage points since that year. We believe that the increase to 62 percent is especially significant because it suggests that more crash-prone, high-risk individuals have now become belt users.

The governors, state legislators, police and local belt coalitions in these states deserve recognition and our appreciation for this milestone in belt use. You don't get 62 percent of the public to do anything in this country without a lot of hard work. Ten years ago, no one would have believed that belt laws, much less such high usage levels, were possible in this country. There truly has been a sea change for the better.

As if I haven't given you enough good news already, there's even more. And, it's particularly gratifying to be able to announce it at this time of year.

The rate of alcohol involvement in fatal crashes continues to decline. (Point to Chart) In 1991, alcohol was involved in 48 percent of total fatalities. Current estimates show only 45.8 percent of the 1992 fatality total will be alcohol-related. That's a significant drop over a one-year period. It's another indication that the scourge of drunk driving is declining ... but that we still have a long way to go. Here, too, there is a bottom line: We predict that 1,600 lives were saved between 1991 and 1992 because of the reduction in alcohol involvement in fatal crashes.

I've said many times that there is no finish line in highway safety. But I must say that it's very encouraging to be able to announce that all the leading indicators -- belts, alcohol, fatality rates -- are pointing and moving in the right direction. Let's keep this positive trend going over the remaining holiday period by buckling up every trip ... and not getting behind the wheel after drinking. These simple steps yield big dividends at the end of every year.

Thank you and best wishes for a safe 1993. And remember -- friends don't let friends drive drunk ... take the keys and wear a seat belt!

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