Testimony of

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H.R. 8190 - To authorize appropriations for fiscal years 1970, 1971 and 1972 to carry out the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966.

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee:

I am Charles D. Baker, Deputy Under Secretary of Transportation. With me today is Dr. Robert Brenner, Acting Director of the National Highway Safety Bureau in the Federal Highway Administration, one of the principal operating agencies in the Department. We are pleased to be here this morning in response to your invitation to testify with respect to H.R. 8190, a bill "To amend the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966 to authorize appropriations for the fiscal years 1970, 1971 and 1972." The Safety Bureau is the agency in the Department responsible for implementing that legislation.

With your permission, I propose to mention some general accomplishments in traffic safety thus far achieved under this Act. Following

my remarks, I would like to have Dr. Brenner -- who has been with the Bureau since its inception -- discuss in greater depth the progress and problems of the vehicle safety program. At the conclusion of his remarks we shall both endeavor to answer any questions you may have.

All of us here are deeply concerned about the high death and injury toll on the Nation's highways. It was to combat this disturbing phenomenon that Congress in 1966 enacted the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act and the Highway Safety Act, and created, under this companion legislation, what is now the National Highway Safety Bureau. In the two years since passage of the legislation -- a very short time in the life of Federal agencies -- there have been a number of accomplishments under both Acts to make automobiles safer to drive and to reduce the likelihood of death or injury in the event of a crash.

As a direct result of the Department's implementation of the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act, newly manufactured vehicles now have to meet 28 Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Performance Standards. And we now have substantial evidence that lives are being saved as a direct result of these standards and the increased safety that they require to be built into new cars. The most encouraging evidence available so far relates to the energy absorbing steering assembly, new high penetration resistant windshields and safety belts.

In the case of the high penetration resistant windshields now required by a Federal standard, a recent analysis of 2,292 crash cases involving 1964 to 1967 models showed that passengers of cars equipped with HPR glass experienced a head injury fatality rate due to windshield contact 32 percent less than that for passengers in cars without HPR windshields.

Another important new safety feature required by a Federal standards is the energy absorbing steering column assembly. Early research had shown that impact with the steering assembly accounted for over 40 percent of all crash injuries. Recent investigation by trained teams of medical and engineering researchers shows that there were no fatal or dangerous injuries resulting from drivers striking an energy absorbing steering column at vehicle crash impact speeds up to 50 miles per hour. This is illustrated by the Figure which I would like to submit for the record.

In the case of safety belts, the payoff evidence is equally striking. A study in Sweden of 28,000 crashes involving over 37,000 vehicle occupants revealed that combination lap belts and upper torso shoulder harnesses produced reductions of about 30 percent for minor injuries and 80 percent for those of fatal severity. Even for only lap belts, data from two States indicate that the death rate per crash is 56 percent higher for occupants who do not wear such belts.

But notwithstanding the demonstrated effectiveness of these and other safety improvements, we nonetheless recognize the disappointing fact that the death toll on the highways has not declined in any absolute sense. To the contrary, preliminary tabulations indicate that over 55,000 deaths occurred in 1968. If present trends continue, another 1/4 million will have died on our Nation's highways by 1972 bringing the total traffic deaths to 2 million since the turn of the century. Several tentative explanations can be offered for both the increase in traffic deaths in 1968 and the disturbing projection:

- First, the number of passenger miles being driven on our roads is continuously increasing, with the number of vehicle registrations increasing at a rate of 4.13 percent annually.
- Second, the number of vehicle miles being driven at very high speeds is also increasing markedly. In one State, crashes involving speeds over 60 miles per hour have increased in the last six years at a much higher rate than those occurring at lower speeds. These increases, far in excess of those predicted by earlier trends, produce a corresponding increase in the number of fatalities. There is no doubt that the prospects for surviving crashes worsen as the crash impact speeds go up.

It is our firm belief that the death tolls would have been much higher and future projections much more unfavorable were it not for the gains that we now know the new safety standards are beginning to produce. However, most of the 100 million vehicles in use today were manufactured prior to January 1, 1968, when the initial Federal standards went into effect, and hence do not contain the new lifesaving features.

As the normal scrappage of old vehicles continues, the percentage of the population of vehicles with the lifesaving features will of course increase. We can accordingly expect an increasingly greater effect upon safety. All of the vehicles manufactured before 1968 will not be off the roads until after 1984.

Thus, it is unmistakably clear that much more has to be done if the grim projections of additional millions of Americans killed on the highways are to be prevented from becoming a reality. In this connection, the Department already has under active consideration a number of additional safety standards and regulations. Current research and development efforts sponsored both by the Department and the industry offer promise of features which will further counter the rising death tolls in crashes. Significant gains are also possible with greater emphasis upon motor vehicle inspections and other State programs to increase used car safety and to check the adequacy of manufacturer defect recall campaigns.

As you know, the Administration is in the process of reviewing the 1970 budget of the previous Administration. That review is not yet completed. Therefore, we are not yet in a position to comment on the authorization levels for the Motor Vehicle Safety Program contained in H.R. 8190. In addition, we are considering amendments to strengthen the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act, and hope to be able to submit these amendments to the Congress in the near future.

Mr. Chairman, this closes my prepared statement to your Committee. I would now like to let Dr. Brenner, the Acting Director of the National Highway Safety Bureau, address you with respect to other facets of the Bureau's operations and programs. And as I stated at the outset, following his testimony we shall both endeavor to answer any questions you may have. Thank you for your attention.