Statement of the Honorable Nicole R. Nason, Administrator
U.S. Department of Transportation
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
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Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this hearing on the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's views on motor vehicle technology and the consumer.

Mr. Chairman, last year, more than 43,000 people died on our nation's roads, an additional 2.7 million people were injured, and the cost to society was a staggering $230 billion. Traffic crashes are the leading cause of death for people ages 4 to 34. My goal as NHTSA administrator is identical to the mission of the agency that Congress wrote into law four decades ago: to reduce fatalities and injuries on our nation's roads.

This is an exciting time to be leading NHTSA, because I believe we are on the cusp of a new era in highway safety, primarily for two reasons. First, SAFETEA-LU, a statute written in part by members of this Subcommittee, is easily the most far-reaching highway safety bill Congress has passed in a generation. Among the safety provisions in this bill is the tripling of the amount of funding going to the states to combat impaired driving, a scourge which claims nearly 17,000 people a year. This legislation also committed the Federal Government to raise safety belt use rates by establishing a $498 million state incentive grant program. This program is already bearing fruit, with three states, Kentucky, Mississippi and Alaska passing primary safety belt laws this year alone. And SAFETEA-LU codified a portion of NHTSA's Rulemaking Priority Plan, which will save thousands of lives by having the auto companies produce safer vehicles.

With SAFETEA-LU helping to guide NHTSA's course for the next three years, the challenge now for the agency is to effectively implement what Congress has enacted.

But we must and can do more.

Apart from the implementation of SAFETEA-LU, I believe the most promising gains in highway safety are going to come from the deployment of crash avoidance technologies. Today the technology exists not only to ameliorate the severity of a crash, but to help prevent it outright. Allow me to briefly describe some of these technologies.

Imagine a car with a forward-collision warning system that can detect when the vehicle in front of it has slowed or stopped. This device can help prevent the most common type of crash, the rear-end collision. Or imagine a car with a road or lane departure warning devices that can alert drivers when they stray from their lane. This device can be especially useful in combating drowsy driving, which is a significant problem.

Imagine a vehicle with a blind-spot warning system that can signal to the driver when another vehicle is in close proximity. Such a system would be invaluable on our congested interstates, where changing lanes at high speeds is common.

But the crash avoidance technology that I believe holds the greatest promise is electronic stability control (ESC). This proven technology senses when a driver may lose control and automatically stabilizes the vehicle. ESC is especially effective in reducing rollovers, one of the most deadly types of crashes, particularly for SUVs, which are high off the road. Each year three percent of crashes involve rollover, but they account for about a third of all occupant deaths. NHTSA estimates that ESC will save up to 10,600 lives annually when fully implemented into the fleet. ESC could be the greatest safety innovation since the safety belt.

In the past, NHTSA focused, and rightly so, on making vehicles more crashworthy, so that during a crash, an occupant would have a better chance of surviving or sustaining only minor injuries. For after the crash, NHTSA pioneered and continues to champion our nation's emergency medical services, so more lives can be saved by rendering immediate aid to the crash victim. But now we have the technology to focus on the crucial period before a potential crash.

This is why I believe crash avoidance technology holds such promise. I am confident that deployment in our vehicle fleet of one or more of these crash avoidance technologies, coupled with the unprecedented resources under SAFETEA-LU we are distributing to the states for highway safety, will translate into fewer crashes and more lives saved.

Mr. Chairman, there is hardly a family in America that hasn't been impacted by a car crash. But the landmark SAFETEA-LU law, coupled with NHTSA's regulatory authority to facilitate deployment of new safety systems, will make our roads safer by the end of this decade.

Mr. Chairman, before I conclude my testimony, I want to shift gears and discuss two other issues under this Subcommittee's jurisdiction that are of importance to me. First, fuel economy not only affects every American, but our national security as well. As Members are aware, this Administration has raised corporate average fuel economy (CAFE) standards for light trucks for seven consecutive years, from 2005 to 2011. These new fuel economy standards will result in a savings of approximately 14.3 billion gallons of fuel over the lifetime of these vehicles. Most importantly, these standards were raised responsibly, without sacrificing jobs or compromising safety, by discarding the archaic "one-size-fits-all" standard and implementing an innovative attribute system based on the light truck's footprint.

NHTSA has the expertise and the experience to reform CAFE for passenger cars, but lacks the statutory authority to do so. Chairman Barton has introduced a bill (H.R. 5359) to rectify this problem, and the Administration supports this legislation. If the Department is given that authority, we will raise the fuel economy standards for passenger cars, and we will do so in a way that does not destroy jobs or disregard safety.

Next, implementing the ENHANCE 911 Act of 2004 is of great importance to me. While approximately 96 percent of the geographic United States is covered by some type of 9-1-1 service, it is estimated that less than half of the nation's Public Safety

Answering Points (PSAPs) are able to receive both the cellular telephone number and geographic location of cellular phone callers, both of which are often necessary for emergency responders to quickly pinpoint the location of vehicular emergencies. To help upgrade PSAPs to receive this critical information, the ENHANCE 911 Act of 2004 authorizes NHTSA and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) in the Department of Commerce to establish a national 9-1-1 Implementation Coordination Office (ICO) and to administer a grant program for PSAPs.

Moreover, as required by SAFETEA-LU, NHTSA is currently establishing the Federal Interagency Committee on Emergency Medical Services, which is strongly supported by our partners at the Department of Homeland Security. We are also managing the Next Generation 9-1-1 program to facilitate the research, design and development of a technologically advanced 9-1-1 system of the future. Finally, NHTSA's Fiscal Year 2007 budget requests funding and a full-time equivalent position to support the National 9-1-1 Office at NHTSA that was authorized by the ENHANCE 911 Act of 2004 and is operated in cooperation with NTIA.

I commend the leadership of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, along with Representatives Shimkus and Eshoo, for establishing the E-9-1-1 program, together with the $43.5 million in funding for E-9-1-1 grants that NHTSA is due to receive in 2008. As emergency medical services are crucial to saving lives on our roads, as well as being a component in the War on Terror, I look forward to working with Members to ensure that NHTSA's EMS office continues to be a leader in the field. Furthermore, to support NHTSA's systems, the Agency recently elevated the EMS Division to an Office in Traffic Injury Control, which affords a higher visibility and importance.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for holding this hearing, and I look forward to working with you and every member of this Subcommittee on these important issues.