

**STATEMENT**

**OF**

***THE ALLIANCE OF AUTOMOBILE MANUFACTURERS***

**BEFORE THE:**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON  
CONSUMER PROTECTION, PRODUCT SAFETY, AND INSURANCE**

**OF THE**

**COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE & TRANSPORTATION  
U.S. SENATE**

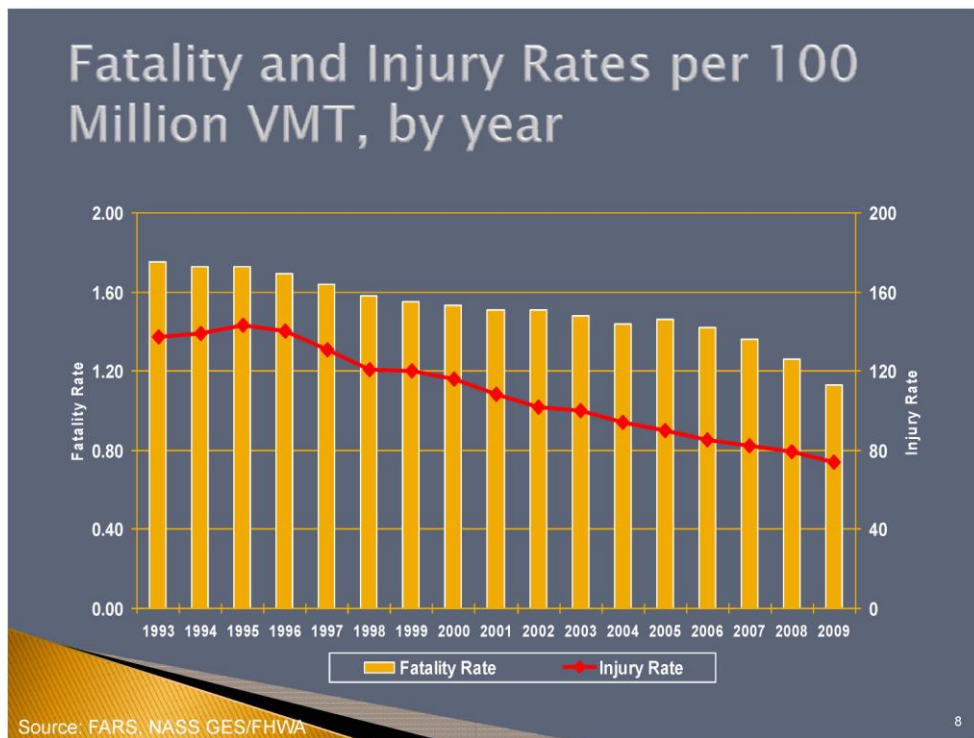
**SEPTEMBER 28, 2010**

**PRESENTED BY:**

Mr. Robert Strassburger  
Vice President of Vehicle Safety and Harmonization

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Subcommittee members. My name is Robert Strassburger and I am Vice President of Vehicle Safety and Harmonization at the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers (Alliance). The Alliance is a trade association of twelve car and light truck manufacturers including BMW Group, Chrysler LLC, Ford Motor Company, General Motors, Jaguar Land Rover, Mazda, Mercedes-Benz, Mitsubishi Motors, Porsche, Toyota, Volkswagen Group of America and Volvo. Within Alliance membership, safety is a top priority. We operate in a high-tech industry that uses cutting-edge safety technology to put people first.

The latest government facts and figures show that U.S. motorists have never been safer. Just this month, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) announced that U.S. traffic fatalities dropped to a record low last year: a 9.7 percent decline from the year before. In 2009 there were 33,808 fatalities in motor vehicle traffic crashes, the lowest fatality number since 1950. 2009 also brought the nation its lowest fatality rate ever: 1.13 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled (VMT).



These declines are even more significant in the face of sharp increases in other key factors – more drivers driving greater distances. In the past 60 years, VMT has more than quadrupled and the number of licensed drivers has more than doubled. Vehicle safety technologies combined with consumer education and tough laws combating the most dangerous driver behaviors have provided us sharp declines in critical fatality and injury statistics, all to the benefit of the traveling public.

Nevertheless, we want to continue to reduce the risk of crashes and fatalities even further. Advancing real world motor vehicle safety remains a public health challenge, and automakers are doing our part. Even during the recent economic downturn, the auto industry spent more than \$86 billion globally in R&D in 2008. Most of the safety features on motor vehicles in the U.S. – antilock brakes, stability control, side airbags for head and chest protection, side curtains, pre-crash occupant positioning, lane departure warning, collision avoidance and more, were developed and implemented voluntarily by manufacturers, in advance of any regulatory mandates. The industry is moving forward, engaging in high-tech research and implementation of new safety technologies including autonomous braking systems, vehicle safety communications systems for crash avoidance and much more. Our commitment is to continuously improve motor vehicle safety.

However, we also recognize that vehicle improvements alone cannot get us to where we need to be as a nation. Even last year's historic low fatality figure represents a public health issue that requires us to identify the root causes and focus our collective efforts on the factors that will provide the biggest real world safety benefits. To that end, the single largest cause of fatal crashes is still alcohol-impaired driving. In fact, even though 2009's actual number of alcohol-related fatalities fell slightly, the percentage of fatalities caused by alcohol-impairment actually increased. And while safety belt use levels are at all-time highs, more than half of all people killed in traffic crashes last year were not wearing safety belts.

These are just two examples of why the Alliance aggressively supports tough laws, education programs and high-visibility enforcement to address drivers' most dangerous behaviors. As this Committee prepares for the next authorization of highway safety grant

programs, the Alliance recommends focusing precious resources on programs that will provide the most safety benefits: increasing safety belt usage; reducing drunk driving and distracted driving; reducing crashes caused by novice drivers; and ensuring NHTSA's traffic safety database continues to be the world's best.

### **Increasing Safety Belt Usage**

No industry sector over the past 25 years has devoted more resources to increasing safety belt usage: the automobile industry has spent \$33 million on these efforts between 1996 and 2007 alone. Safety belts are the most effective means immediately available to motorists to keep them safe in crashes. The Alliance is proud of the work we have done with our traffic safety partners to successfully pass primary safety belt enforcement laws in more than 30 states. As soon as possible, that needs to be 50 states.

SAFETEA-LU included the largest incentive grant program in history as a way to encourage states to pass these proven and effective belt laws. Those incentives helped influence elected officials in 12 states to enact primary enforcement laws in recent years. Unfortunately, adoption of these laws also failed by narrow margins in many other states.

NHTSA's figures show that the total passenger vehicle occupant fatality rate per 100 million VMT is 9 percent higher in non-primary enforcement states than it is for states that have primary enforcement legislation in place. According to the agency, an additional 4,100 lives would have been saved in 2008 (the latest year for which data is available) if all unrestrained passenger vehicle occupants five and older involved in fatal crashes had worn their safety belts.

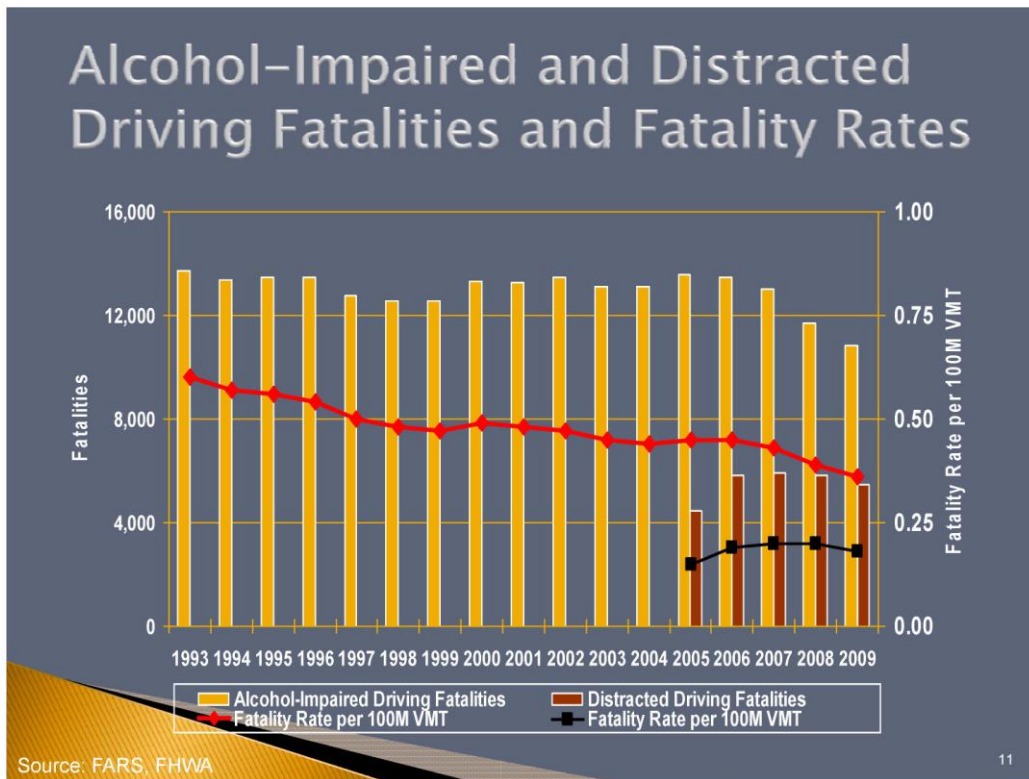
It has taken a quarter century to get just over half of the states to adopt primary enforcement laws. The Alliance now urges Congress to take the next step and include provisions for withholding a percentage of Highway Trust Fund monies from states that have failed to adopt primary enforcement safety belt laws. And, furthermore, we urge Congress to announce its

intention to include such a provision as soon as possible, as this will induce state legislatures to act now.

Sanctions have worked effectively to accelerate the process of passing laws and creating uniform safety policy in all 50 states and in the District of Columbia. Congress employed this tactic to encourage states to adopt a minimum legal drinking age of 21 (1984), zero alcohol tolerance laws for youth under 21 (1995), and 0.08 percent *per se* blood alcohol content (BAC) laws (2000). It is time to take a similar step with primary enforcement laws.

### Reducing Drunk Driving

Another significant traffic safety concern continues to be impaired driving, which accounts for more than 32 percent of all motor vehicle fatalities. We have made substantial progress in reducing impaired driving in the last two decades, but we must do more.



In November 2006, the Alliance, among others, joined with the U.S. Department of Transportation, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS), the Governors Highway Safety Association, and the International Association of Chiefs of Police, to support MADD's Campaign to Eliminate Drunk Driving. The Campaign is pursuing the adoption of state laws mandating the installation of alcohol ignition interlocks (breathalyzers) on vehicles driven by convicted drunk drivers. New Mexico has become the first state to adopt this mandate, and has benefitted by seeing a 30 percent drop in alcohol-involved crashes. Injuries and fatalities are down too, by 32 percent and 22 percent respectively. The bipartisan reauthorization bill introduced in the House by Transportation Committee Chairman Oberstar and Ranking Member Mica included a provision requiring states to adopt mandatory ignition interlocks for convicted offenders as a condition for receiving Section 410 grants. Last December, Senators Lautenberg and Udall introduced similar legislation, the Drunk Driving Repeat Offender Prevention Act (S. 2920). We urge the Senate to include similar provisions in its reauthorization bill.

In addition, in 2008 the Alliance, working through the Automotive Coalition for Traffic Safety (ACTS), joined NHTSA in a five-year, \$10 million cooperative agreement to research in-vehicle alcohol detection technologies that could prevent drivers from even starting a vehicle if their blood alcohol content is at or above 0.08, which is the legal limit. Such technologies hold tremendous promise for keeping alcohol-impaired drivers off the road and reducing their impact on innocent motorists and passengers who lose their lives or are injured in drunk driving crashes. An IIHS analysis reveals that if driver blood alcohol concentrations can be limited to less than 0.08, approximately 9,000 lives might be saved annually. We are pleased to support Senator Udall's legislation, S. 3039, which would aid the funding of this crucial research.

### **Reducing Distracted Driving**

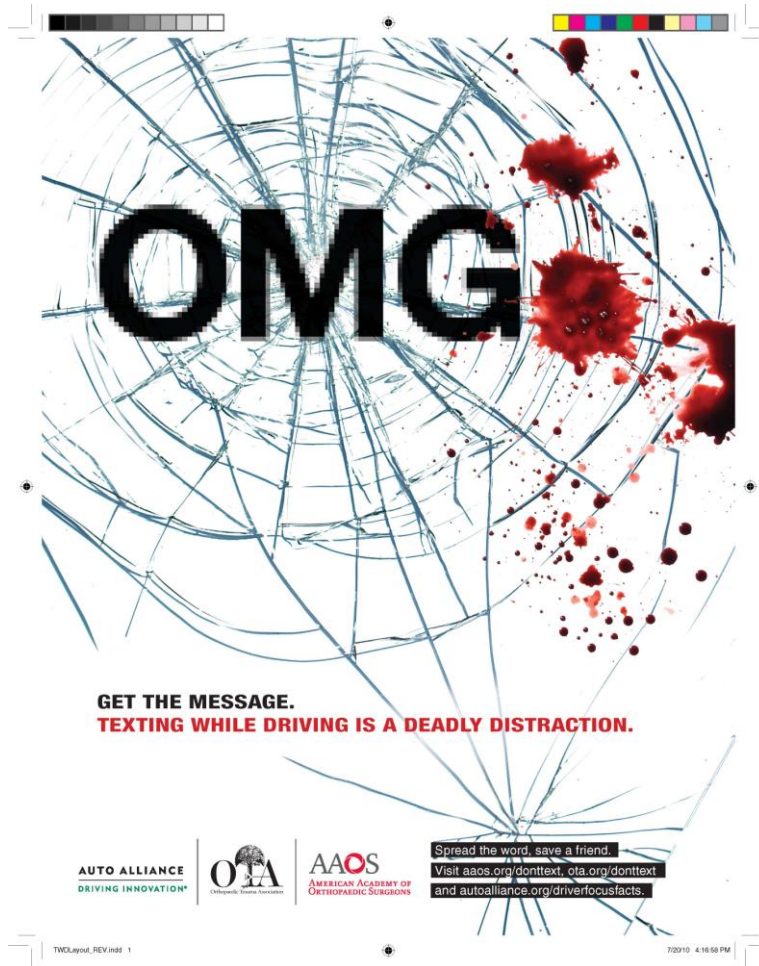
Alliance members take concerns about driver distraction very seriously, and we applaud this Committee's efforts to raise the awareness about the dangers of distracted driving. While technology has made our world more connected than ever, the ease of connectivity has presented us all with new challenges. Alliance members prioritize safety in vehicle design, including

cutting-edge in-vehicle information systems that allow drivers to keep their hands on the wheel and eyes on the road.

This is why we recommend the Congress adopt the proven three-prong strategy that has worked so effectively in reducing drunk driving and increasing safety belt usage: (1) appropriate laws backed up by high visibility enforcement; (2) increased consumer education; and (3) increased research dollars to further evaluate driver behavior and safety countermeasures.

The Alliance supports state laws banning hand-held texting and hand-held calling while driving, to accelerate the transition to more advanced, safer ways to communicate. The Alliance also supports the use of texting bans like those proposed by Chairman Rockefeller in S. 1938 to combat unsafe behavior, and is working with Congress and other stakeholders to ensure that the legislation passed allows for innovative technologies to be included on the cars of the future to provide consumers with important safety benefits.

We need consumer education so that drivers know that even with the cutting-edge technology found in today's cars – driving distractions remain a risk. Not just hand-held texting and hand-held calling, but eating, drinking, searching for a CD – anything that prolongs a driver's "eyes off road" time presents a risk. This is why the Alliance is proud to partner with leading medical associations in launching a broad, national, multimedia campaign to raise awareness. The OMG Campaign launched this month is a national, multi-media campaign designed to help raise awareness of the dangers of distracted driving.



And thirdly on the distracted driving front, the Alliance recognizes the need to fund continued research so that we can further understand driver behaviors and evaluate alternative means of addressing the concern. This three-pronged approach has worked for 0.08 BAC limits and "Click It or Ticket" safety belt usage campaigns. It will work here as well.

With regard to increasing safety belt usage and preventing drunk and distracted driving, we also urge the Committee to continue its leadership by providing federal funding for paid advertising to support high visibility enforcement campaigns, like "Click It or Ticket" and "Over the Limit, Under Arrest." This advertising is essential to the continuing success of these activities.



## **Reducing Crashes Caused by Novice Drivers**

Alliance members believe that obtaining a driver's license is a privilege and, as such, states should take special care in granting that privilege to new drivers. A recent IIHS study found that teen licensing laws rated "good" are associated with a 30 percent lower fatal crash rate among 15-17 year-olds, compared with licensing laws that are rated "poor." Examples of helpful teen licensing laws include: requiring all occupants to wear safety belts when a teen is behind the wheel; restricting the number of passengers for teenage drivers; prohibiting impaired driving at any level; and prohibiting all portable electronic communication and entertainment devices.

The Alliance supports inclusion of language similar to S. 3269, the STANDUP ACT, co-sponsored by Senator Klobuchar. The STANDUP ACT would establish minimum federal requirements for state graduated driver licensing (GDL) laws and provide incentive grants for states to adopt GDL laws that meet those minimum requirements within three years. After three years, those states that have not adopted these GDL laws would be subject to a sanction of their highway funding.

## **Ensuring NHTSA's Traffic Safety Database Continues to be the World's Best**

Lastly, as we work to further improve real world safety through additional advancements in vehicle design, NHTSA and safety researchers must have robust databases upon which to assess current and future safety needs of adults and children. The National Automotive Sampling System (NASS) is an essential nationwide data collection resource that provides the department and safety researchers with detailed motor vehicle crash and injury information. It is operated by the National Center for Statistics and Analysis of NHTSA. NASS – which began in 1979 – is a primary resource for identifying traffic safety issues, establishing priorities, assisting in the design of future safety countermeasures and for evaluating existing countermeasures.

The budget for NASS has not kept pace with either the department's informational needs or inflation. Moreover, these needs are growing as Alliance members reinvent the automobile in response to societal demands for ever safer and cleaner vehicles. The capability of NASS has been dramatically reduced. Currently, NASS collects in-depth data on approximately 4,500 crashes – less than a third of the intended design size of 15,000 to 20,000 crash cases annually. Further, NASS lacks adequate data on children involved in motor vehicle crashes.

NASS should be funded at a level sufficient to attain its intended design size to ensure critical “real-world” data is collected at a sufficient number of sites nationwide to provide the statistically valid, nationally representative sample originally intended. The Alliance also supports enhancing NASS's capacity to collect sufficient data concerning our most precious cargo – our children. An additionally funded child occupant protection component to NASS is currently in pilot development at NHTSA through industry grants to The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. These goals can be accomplished with an incremental \$40 million dollar annual investment in NASS, which equates to 1.73 cents for every \$100 of economic loss from traffic injuries and fatalities.

Thank you for your consideration of these recommendations, and we look forward to working with this Committee as you move forward in the process.

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