

Statement of the Honorable David Strickland
Administrator, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
Subcommittee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Insurance
United States Senate
September 28, 2010

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, it is a great pleasure to be back in familiar surroundings to talk with you today about SAFETEA-LU. Just as previous authorizations have structured NHTSA's safety programs in the past – by establishing grant programs, funding research areas, and highlighting key issues - the next authorization will shape Federal and States safety programs for years to come. Therefore, I am very pleased to be invited to share my thoughts on SAFETEA-LU and its results.

Secretary LaHood recently released data showing that in 2009, the Nation continued to make dramatic progress in motor vehicle safety. Fatalities fell almost 10 percent between 2008 and 2009, and injuries declined by more than 5 percent. Fatalities fell in 41 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Many factors help account for this broad-based, nationwide improvement. Secretary LaHood has been focused on safety since his first day in office, and his example and persistence have inspired me and all of NHTSA to redouble our efforts to fight unsafe driving behaviors. Our State and local partners, who are in the field every day, enforcing traffic laws, training new drivers, developing local outreach campaigns, and otherwise promoting safety, are obviously crucial in the progress we have seen. But part of the progress is attributable to Congress, for I believe that the grants, research, and other programs authorized by SAFETEA-LU played an important role in the significant reduction in highway fatalities.

As the chart (behind me? See last page) shows, almost all the safety indicators we monitor indicate that safety has improved since the passage of SAFETEA-LU. Overall, both the number and the rate of traffic fatalities have fallen by about 21 percent between 2004 and 2009. Some of the other rows in the chart suggest why the number may be falling: seat belt use is up by 5 percent, and child passenger restraint use among occupants 8 years old or younger is up by 6 percent.

However, you will notice that there is one indicator that is moving in the wrong direction, motorcycle fatalities. Between 2004 and 2009, the number of motorcycle riders killed increased from just over 4,200 to almost 4,462, an 11 percent increase. The number of motorcycle fatalities did fall between 2008 and 2009, the first time we have seen a decrease in more than a decade. We need to work to build on last year's progress. The most important step we could take would be to assure that all riders wear a DOT-compliant helmet, which are 37 percent effective in reducing fatalities. We estimate that helmets prevented over 1,800 fatalities in 2008, and that more than 800 additional fatalities could have been avoided if all riders wore helmets. NHTSA will actively work with Congress to promote helmet use.

This chart demonstrates that overall, the programs Congress created in SAFETEA-LU, and the tools that were provided to NHTSA, had the intended effect. The Nation has enjoyed sixteen (16) consecutive quarters of reduction in highway crash fatalities, an unprecedented occurrence. Aside from the admittedly important exception of motorcyclists, the data are moving in the correct direction: belt use is up, alcohol impaired fatalities are down, and overall fatalities and injuries are falling.

It is important to acknowledge that this progress may be partly attributable to the economic downturn the country continues to suffer through. While overall traffic has increased, we believe discretionary travel may have fallen. Data suggests these trips are higher risk than daily commuting trips. So as the economy improves, crashes may increase somewhat. That makes it all the more important that we continue to promote programs that work, and continue to modify and revise our approach to further enhance safety. Therefore, I would like to spend a minute discussing why that is, what we think worked in SAFETEA-LU.

First, SAFETEA-LU established the Section 406 Safety Belt Incentive program. This program provided a sizeable incentive for States to adopt primary belt laws, and fourteen (14) States have either adopted new primary belt laws (PBLs), or upgraded existing laws because of this incentive. Another seven (7) States qualified for Section 406 grants by achieving two consecutive years of eighty-five percent (85%) observed safety belt usage. Enactment of a primary safety belt use law is one of the most important safety countermeasures available. States enacting primary belt laws typically see about a 10 percent increase in belt use, and belts have been shown to be about 50 percent effective in reducing fatalities, still the single most important piece of safety equipment in a vehicle. The Section 406 incentive program clearly had a positive effect in increasing safety belt usage across the Nation and contributing to the reduction in highway fatalities through the authorization period.

In addition, 18 States enacted new booster seat laws, up from the 5 States and DC that had such laws in 2006. These laws are crucial in protecting our youngest and most vulnerable citizens.

The Section 410 Impaired Driving Countermeasure Program made approximately \$650 million in grants available to the States from 2006-2010. During the same period, alcohol-related fatalities on the Nation's highways declined by seventeen percent (17%) from 13,099 to 10,839. This reduction reflects the hard work of the agency, States and communities, law enforcement agencies across the nation, and the non-governmental organizations that work so hard to prevent impaired driving crashes.

Congress also provided in SAFETEA-LU, \$29 million each year to fund high visibility enforcement campaigns to support law enforcement efforts on-the-ground to reduce impaired driving and increase safety belt use. These funds are used to place paid advertising to educate the public about the "*Over the Limit. Under Arrest.*", impaired driving national crackdown, and the *Click It or Ticket*, national safety belt usage mobilization. High visibility enforcement is a very successful model for achieving highway safety behavior modification and our national enforcement campaigns, particularly Click It or Ticket, have become a part of the national lexicon. We are piloting this approach for dealing with distracted driving in Hartford and Syracuse, and the early results look very promising.

SAFETEA-LU also had some special emphasis areas including annual funding for older driver safety and for law enforcement training on police pursuits. The older driver program has resulted in the creation of a variety of programs aimed at older drivers, particularly related to improving the scientific basis of driver licensing decisions through the development and promotion of driver fitness medical guidelines. During the authorization period, fatalities involving drivers age 65 and older dropped by 16% even while the population of older drivers continued to increase. While older individuals exhibit safer behavior – in fatal crashes, they are less likely to be alcohol impaired and more likely to be buckled – too many older citizens continue to die in fatal crashes. NHTSA has also worked with law enforcement organizations to develop vehicular pursuit training, which helps promote the safety of public, the violator, and the officer. NHTSA and the International Association of Directors of Law Enforcement Standards and Training (IADLEST) have partnered to develop and provide a comprehensive pursuit policy program. Over 400 instructors have been trained, and workshops are in progress which, among other components, encourage law enforcement agencies to analyze current pursuit policies and training requirements.

Apart from safety countermeasure programs, SAFETEA-LU continued a grant program structure with multiple grant programs addressing individual countermeasures such as impaired driving, occupant protection, motorcycle safety, child and booster seats, data improvement, and the highway safety formula grant program. These multiple grants often come with different application deadlines, different State matching requirements, and different types of eligibility requirements. While providing maximum flexibility to States to qualify for grant funding during a fiscal year, and ably advancing programmatic objectives in each area, these multiple application and matching requirements create resource administration problems for the States, as well as the Department of Transportation. In SAFETEA-LU, Congress directed the DOT to consolidate grant applications, by establishing a process whereby States could apply for all grants with a single application. Unfortunately, the Department was unable to meet this mandate, due to the large number of grant programs and the wide variation in grant criteria. In particular, some grants depend on States passing a certain law to be eligible for a grant that year. The potential to qualify for different grants at different points of the fiscal year makes establishing a consolidated grant application impossible.

We look forward to a fruitful dialogue with the Committee and our State and non-governmental partners on potential methods for dealing with the administrative as well as programmatic requirements of our national highway safety program. NHTSA has worked with, and will continue to work with, other US DOT agencies that have a role in improving highway safety within the Department. That includes RITA regarding the ITS Program; FMCSA regarding commercial vehicle safety; and FHWA regarding the roadway infrastructure design and operations, as well as for the Strategic Highway Research Program (SHRP2).

SAFETEA-LU has been a very successful piece of legislation. The Committee, the Congress, the multiple constituencies with an interest in the transportation program and we at the Department can look back on SAFETEA-LU and know that it helped our Nation make significant strides in improving highway safety.

We can be proud of what has been accomplished but also recognize that so much more needs to be done. Clearly, even with the lowest absolute fatality number since 1950 and the lowest fatality rate number in our Nation's history, more than 33,000 fatalities a year on our highways is not a number that we can accept. We need to renew our commitment to finding new and better ways to reach those difficult to reach populations to change their behavior, to make vehicles safer, to develop new technologies to improve our safety margin, so that we can continue to make steady progress in reducing this preventable epidemic of roadway crashes.

We must also anticipate new areas for fruitful effort, such as initiatives to address driver distraction, to address issues before they become serious, national problems.

Under the leadership of Secretary LaHood, the Department looks forward to working with this Committee to address the highway safety challenges of today and into the future. I appreciate the opportunity to be with you today and will be happy to try to answer any questions you may have.

SAFETEA-LU Safety Performance Indicators

	<i>2004</i>	<i>Current</i>	<i>Change</i>
Total Fatalities	42,836	33,808	-21%
MC Fatalities	4,028	4,462	+ 11%
Fatality Rate	1.44	1.13	-22%
Alcohol Impaired Fatalities	13,099	10,839	-17%
Belt Use Rate	80%	85%	+6%
Child Restraint Use, <8	82%	87%	+6%
Universal Helmet Laws	20+DC	20+DC	NA
PBL	21+DC	31+DC	+48%