Stephen R. Kratzke
Associate Administrator for Safety Performance Standards
at the
Society of Plastics Engineers Global Automotive Safety Conference in Detroit, MI
on February 10, 2002.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today about safety.

Dr. Runge wishes he could be here with you today but was unable to do so due to the death of his father.

Automobiles are both good news and bad news for American society. The good news is that we have ready mobility in a private and secure environment. Our society's mobility now is taken for granted, but would have seemed like science fiction a century ago. Our cars make us feel good. For many people they are expressions of our personalities and for others they are merely a practical means of transportation. In any case everyone expects their vehicle to be nimble at avoiding crashes, and take care of him or her in the event of a crash.

The bad news is that vehicles are also a contributor to a serious public health problem. Motor vehicle crash is the leading cause of death for children greater than 3 years of age and is the leading cause of years of life lost in our country, far exceeding cancer and cardiovascular disease like stroke and heart attack. In the year 2000, there were 41,821 Americans killed in or by motor vehicles. If there were any other disease in this country that killed as many people, there should be no doubt that our political system would ensure that every possible resource were devoted towards its elimination. Unfortunately, there is a great risk tolerance for death and injury from motor vehicles because of its perception as being unavoidable "accidents."

In that light, it behooves everyone who has anything to do with this industry to take corporate and personal responsibility to help eliminate this scourge on American society.

We spend a lot of time speaking with and seeking the help of the automobile manufacturers about this safety mission. Considering the safety protections offered by vehicles 30 years ago, there have been huge strides made in occupant safety. But there is still more to do.

When we look at causation, we know that human factors and driver errors are responsible for the majority of motor vehicle crashes. We also know that an unfortunately large number of crashes are caused by physiologic impairments such as alcohol, drugs, or other physical infirmities. But if we assume that those factors account for 90 to 95 percent of all crashes, that still leaves 5 to 10 percent of crashes that are caused by vehicle problems or defects. Since there are about 6.3 million crashes yearly, that means that about half a million of those crashes are the result of vehicle problems. And this is unacceptable.

It is certainly much easier to consider safety when you are engineering a vehicle or vehicle component than it is for NHTSA to try to think of every possible way a person can be harmed in a vehicle and write a regulation to prevent it. We much prefer voluntary brilliance to involuntary compliance.

What I would like to do is to challenge you to begin to think long-term about your niche in the system of motor vehicle safety. I want each of you in the room to ponder for yourself what the safe vehicle of the future should look like. We know that propulsion systems may be vastly different over the next two decades. I ask that all of you begin to contemplate how to incorporate ideal safety design into what will be a blank slate. At the same time you figure out where to put batteries and tanks of hydrogen or borax, please think freely about how to draw the picture with safety as your first priority. I would encourage you develop a vision and to work personally towards that end.

There are so many obvious ways in which engineering can solve common but very severe problems. Dr. Runge often asks why is it that his 5-foot, 1-inch mother must manually hold the shoulder belt away from her neck while driving or riding in her car? Can we not engineer safety belts that are comfortable for people of all sizes and shapes? Surely if we can design a cruise control that knows how fast the cars around you are going, we should be able to create seat belt designs that are not a disincentive to their use.

Another question Dr. Runge often asks is why does it take a 4-day course and a post graduate degree to properly install a child safety seat in a vehicle? Why is it that seat manufacturers and child safety seat manufacturers aren't working together to ensure a perfect fit every time by an average mom or dad installer? Why is it that we at NHTSA have to create regulations for seat strength or ask for comments about how to avoid roof crush? Aren't these things inherently obvious to anyone who manufactures components or automobiles?

Those of you who make interactive devices for vehicles, please know that you bear a particular responsibility to assess the distraction potential from such devices. The agency has not yet decided which way we will go in performance standards for distracting components. We would prefer that you designers and manufacturers would prospectively accumulate such data that may alert you to inappropriate distraction potential. These data may likewise reassure both you and us that this problem has been addressed and does not warrant new regulations by the agency.

NHTSA has an Administrator who believes heavily in personal responsibility. But he also believes in corporate responsibility, and that corporations should do all that they can to be good citizens, not only for the benefit of their customers, but those people with whom its customers share the road. For example, when vehicles collide, they should do so compatibly. The fact that you are a responsible driver is great. But you should not pay the price for someone else's lack of responsibility.

Safety is also good for the American economy. The most rapidly rising cost in our society is health care and it has been for the last 25 years. Everyone needs to do his or her part,

whether you are the CEO of a corporation or a design engineer with a mouse in your hand all day long.

All of the automobile manufacturers now understand that safety sells. We would emphasize that it should not be the perception of safety that sells, but real safety. NHTSA is committed through its NCAP Program and its consumer information to disclose data to the public that they can use in selecting a vehicle. Dr. Runge's favorite motto is Esse Quam Videri, which means "to be rather than to seem." We are committed to being, not just bearing the title of, the public's agent for automobile safety. We would encourage each of you to be the guardians of the public safety through your undivided attention to safety in your design and manufacturing processes, rather than simply giving manufacturers a marketing point.

We will be unwavering in our mission, and we would challenge all manufacturers and all suppliers to join us in working towards the same goal. As Dr. Runge likes to inform me, if everyone always did the right thing, we wouldn't need performance standards. In that light, NHTSA wishes to applaud the industry for the innovations in safety engineering that you have already made. The improvements you have made in occupant crash protection, including more advanced seat belts and front and side air bags, and in braking and handling capabilities represent quantum leaps forward for safety. But now we challenge you to create your vision for the safety concept car of the next decade, which can and must become a reality, as opposed to a marketing concept.