World Forum for the Harmonization of Vehicle Regulations

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and good morning to everyone. It is a great pleasure and honor to join you at this session of WP.29. I have been looking forward to meeting the distinguished delegates of WP.29 since my appointment as Administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Let me begin by congratulating you on your many achievements:

- You have made WP.29 the focal point where countries from all over world come together to share their experiences in vehicle safety, identify best practices, and find common ways of solving the most pressing vehicle safety issues.
- You have attracted increasing numbers of members to the 1998 Agreement -- 22 Contracting Parties at this point, which is tremendous progress for an agreement that is only 4 years old.
- You have agreed to a Program of Work that will guide this body's

efforts under the 1998 Agreement for the next few years; and

- You are now making formal proposals under the Agreement and beginning to lay the groundwork for potential global technical regulations.

In fact, I am happy to announce that later this week, NHTSA will present its first proposal to the Executive Committee of the 1998 Agreement for the development of a Global Technical Regulation. Our proposal will seek to improve door locks and door retention systems to help prevent injury and death due to ejection.

Mr. Chairman and distinguished delegates, I would like to emphasize that my agency is fully committed to the WP.29 process and to the implementation of the 1998 Agreement. Our commitment is evident in our growing participation in this forum at both the policy and expert group level.

For the first time in the history of this group, the U.S. is chairing an expert group -- the Working Party on Passive Safety. In addition to door locks and door retention components, we will continue to take the lead in advancing several other areas in the Program of Work of the 1998 Agreement.

One area in which we intend to take the lead is in improving requirements for **head restraints.** This is an important issue worldwide for the health of our citizens, with significant economic impact. Based on our data from the 1990s, close

to 900,000 whiplash injuries occurred annually in the United States.

The opportunity to reduce these injuries is particularly important to me from my perspective as a physician with 20 years of experience in emergency medicine practice, teaching, and research. Each and every day I saw the people who were directly affected by the regulations we promulgate.

From my perspective, the steady stream of neck injuries in otherwise uninjured patients is a design problem. These are injuries that could have been prevented. Since the human neck is not be designed to absorb the energy of even a low speed car crash, our vehicles can and should be designed to do what the human neck cannot.

Whiplash injuries may not be life threatening, but they certainly are life altering. People with true whiplash have a difficult time with many simple activities of daily living, or even turning over in bed without waking up. There is no effective medicine for the more severe cases, and surgery is not an option; but improving head restraints does have the potential of improving the quality of life for hundreds of thousands of Americans every year, and millions of people worldwide.

We have been working to upgrade our head restraint regulation for quite a while. In January 2001, we published a notice of proposed rulemaking requesting comments on our proposal to upgrade our standard by harmonizing with the ECE regulation to improve neck protection. These proposed improvements include

changing the height requirements and limiting the distance between the back of the head and the head restraint.

We will soon publish a Final Rule that we will bring to Geneva for consideration by the Executive Committee of the 1998 Agreement as a potential Global Technical Regulation. We believe that a GTR in this area is achievable, and we are eager to do it.

Two other areas in the Program of Work of particular interest to my agency and others in the United States Government are hydrogen fuel cell vehicles and vehicle compatibility. We must anticipate and address future safety issues associated with hydrogen fuel cell vehicles, including fuel system integrity and crashworthiness and compatibility of these lighter weight vehicles.

In the case of vehicle compatibility, we must address serious safety issues resulting from the varying mix of vehicle sizes, weights, construction, etc. This mix is already causing a rapidly growing number of deaths and injuries, especially in the United States. The Executive Committees of the 1998 Agreement and WP.29 have agreed to both subjects as areas important for the exchange of information.

First, Regarding Hydrogen Fuel Cell Vehicles:

The increasing demand for mobility and expanding motor vehicle fleets worldwide contribute to more consumption of petroleum based fuels, more air pollution, and the greater possibility for climate change. Countermeasures for

addressing these matters include the development of hi-tech, environmentally friendly vehicles such as hydrogen fuel cell vehicles, which emit only water instead of carbon and nitrogen gases. This is indeed a very exciting proposition for future generations.

However, in our exuberance about the advantages for our environment and consumption of fossil fuels, we must not be caught off guard with the potential impact on safety. It will be challenging to find the appropriate balance between ensuring a continuing energy supply, protecting the environment, and ensuring safety. Only then can we move forward with confidence, and in turn, build consumer confidence in these advanced technologies.

Many countries around the world have been conducting research to promote hydrogen vehicle technologies. Just last month, President Bush, in his annual "State of the Union" address to America, announced his intentions to focus U.S. efforts on developing, testing and deploying hydrogen-fueled vehicles. The industry worldwide has made tremendous progress in researching and building prototypes of these vehicles. I have personally driven hydrogen fuel cell vehicles in Europe, Japan and the U.S., and I find them to be a promising technology. However, thus far, our safety evaluation of these vehicles is limited. While the industry has been working diligently to develop harmonized industry standards, governments are only beginning to assess these technologies from a regulatory perspective. Much

research and testing is still needed in order to evaluate their safety impact and develop a performance-oriented regulation that will not limit technological innovation.

I understand that an informal group has been formed by WP.29 to develop safety regulations for hydrogen-fueled vehicles. The U.S. is supportive of this effort and would like to participate in the process fully. Today, I would like to propose the development of a cooperative action plan by WP.29 for the assessment of these technologies, including an outline of the research and testing that is required to support a regulation. I urge WP.29, in developing a regulation, to assess the performance, not only of individual components such as fuel tank integrity, but also the overall fuel system and power train during a crash. Our ultimate concern is to ensure the safety of people who may be riding in these vehicles. Governments and industry should work together to assure the public that these vehicles will be safe on the road. While a safety regulation may be important for building consumer confidence in the products, any regulation must be based on sound research and testing.

Now, Regarding Vehicle Compatibility:

The growing popularity of light trucks -- including pickups, minivans, and sport utility vehicles -- over the past 20 years has changed the safety picture. This is especially true in the United States where today about half of all new vehicle sales

fall into this category. This changing fleet composition presents new safety challenges.

Two issues stand out-- Rollover and Compatibility. These issues are at the top of my agency's vehicle safety agenda. Today, I would like to focus on Compatibility, because this subject is on the Program of Work of the 1998 Agreement.

As engineers and scientists, all of you understand that compatibility is the degree to which vehicles are matched in vehicle-to-vehicle crashes. In the fleet of 20 years ago, the primary incompatibility was one of weight, involving large cars and small cars. However, the drastic change in the fleet mix in the United States has made us aware of the importance of other incompatibilities as well – geometric incompatibility manifested in the alignment of interacting vehicle structures, such as bumpers and chassis frame rails. There are also differences in the stiffness and design of their structures and in style of construction, in particular, vehicles with frames versus those with unibody construction.

The effects of incompatibility can be seen in what happens when light trucks strike passenger cars. Data indicate that occupants of passenger cars in the United States experience the greatest risk in frontal and side impacts between passenger cars and light trucks.

When a pickup truck or full-size van strikes a passenger car in a frontal

crash, there are eight driver fatalities in the passenger car for every fatality in the pickup or van. When an SUV strikes a car in frontal impact, there are four driver fatalities in the car for every driver fatality in the SUV.

The problem is even worse in side crashes. The higher frame rails of light trucks may override the rails of a passenger car, resulting in the force being absorbed by the softer structures, resulting in greater intrusion. Likewise, the higher engine compartment poses a risk to the head and chest area for passenger car occupants. This is manifested in the statistics: when pickup trucks strike the side of passenger cars, there are 39 passenger car driver fatalities among for every pickup driver fatality. When SUVs strike passenger cars on the side, there are 22 passenger car driver fatalities for every SUV driver fatality.

NHTSA has a broad range of research activities currently underway on vehicle compatibility. Our immediate goal is to generate knowledge that can be used by governments and industry. We are continuing to investigate real-world crashes, conducting crash testing and using computer modeling. We also have formed an agency-wide Integrated Project Team (IPT) to address this issue. The team is evaluating existing data and identifying measures that can improve the safety features of the struck vehicles and reduce the aggressiveness of the striking vehicle. The team's recommendations will be published for comments in the U.S. Federal Register this spring.

While we are committed to reducing the incompatibility problem, we cannot do it alone. We hope to continue to work with WP.29 and the Working Party on Passive Safety as well as the International Harmonized Research Activities in order to exchange information, conduct joint evaluations and develop solutions in a harmonized fashion.

In closing, Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Delegates, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address this forum. Your work is challenging, but very important. We all want "best safety practices" for our countries and we would like them, to the extent possible, harmonized with the rest of the world. I would like to reiterate the importance of continuing to work closely together to give the harmonization processes that we have set up a chance to mature and succeed. I challenge all of us to be visionary, but also to be patient and creative in finding solutions. I wish you best of luck in your work and look forward to celebrating with you the establishment of the first global technical regulations.

Mr. Chairman, before I conclude today, I would like to make a special presentation if you would allow me. I understand that Mr. Jan Jerie, our Secretariat, will be retiring and that this would be his last WP.29 meeting. On behalf of the United States, I would like to wish him well and thank him for all his hard work over the years and his commitment to vehicle safety. I have heard about his diligence, discipline and sense of humor. I have also heard about his

commitment to the work of this body and the many late nights of work during each session.

From the U.S. perspective, he has been very supportive of our involvement with this forum and has helped transform it into a truly global body. Mr. Chairman, with your permission, on behalf of my agency, the Department of Transportation and the Environmental Protection Agency, I would like to congratulate Mr. Jerie and present him with a plaque "in recognition for his outstanding contributions to vehicle safety worldwide and to the global harmonization of vehicle safety regulations."

Mr. Jerie: VSHÉ NAYLEPSHĒĒ GRATOOLOUYIE_____"

- Thank you, Mr. Chairman.