



Shift to smaller cars raises safety questions

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By John Crawley – Analysis

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - An accelerating consumer shift from sport utility vehicles and pickups to more fuel-efficient cars should reduce rollover, but safety experts worry a lighter fleet poses serious risks despite air bags, anti-collision systems and other advances.

"Shifting to smaller vehicles will make the problem worse," said Adrian Lund, president of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, a group that measures crash test performance that is backed by insurance companies. "You're better off in a bigger vehicle than in a smaller one."

Distressed U.S. auto giants are moving to retool plants and leverage operations in Europe, Latin America and elsewhere to get more small cars to American consumers in coming years and meet tougher federal fuel economy standards.

U.S. sales are down in 2008 with gas prices above \$4 a gallon and consumers caught in a slowing economy. But sales of compacts, sedans and other cars jumped 3 percent in June compared with a 19 percent drop for less efficient SUVs and pickups, according to Ward's Automotive Group.

General Motors Corp has ramped up production of its compact Chevrolet Cobalt and the subcompact Aveo and is working on the Volt electric car. Ford Motor Co plans to introduce the Fiesta to the United States in 2010. Chrysler LLC has a partnership with Nissan for the Japanese manufacturer to build it a small car based on a Chrysler design to better compete in the market.

Popular fuel-efficient compacts and sedans are made by Japan's Toyota Motor Corp and Honda Motor Co Ltd.

More than 40,000 people are killed annually on U.S. roads in traffic-related accidents. Three-quarters of the victims are in passenger vehicles with two-thirds of them, just under 19,000, in cars. Most were killed in front or side crashes, according to 2006 federal data, the latest available.

Fewer "higher riding" truck-style SUVs and pickups driven for everyday use should reduce rollovers, which account for about a quarter of all traffic fatalities, experts agree.

But some note that cars are lighter, not as stiff and have less room inside to protect occupants in collisions with other vehicles and objects, such as poles and trees.

"When they hit narrow, vertical fixed-object hazards like telephone poles, a front-end collision at higher speeds results in deep intrusion, sometimes resulting in ripping the engine from its mounts and pushing it through the firewall into the occupants," **Gerald Donaldson**, senior research director for **Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety**, an alliance of interests that includes insurance companies.

Donaldson said the government must toughen crash tests and finalize a rigorous roof strength standard.

BETTER CRASH PROTECTION

Rae Tyson, spokesman for the Transportation Department's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, said the government is aware of safety group concerns. He added it is too early to identify new trends.

NHTSA, Tyson said, is researching better crash protection as well as possible safety issues with batteries in hybrids and all-electric cars, and others that use biofuels.

Tyson said cars are well equipped and safer than during the last fuel-driven consumer shift to smaller vehicles in the 1970s when the death rate spiked.

"Back then there was a sacrifice because smaller cars being built did not match up to larger vehicles. That's not true now," Tyson said.

Jim Vondale, Ford's director of safety, said the automaker is learning more about making stronger vehicles in "smaller packages," trying to maximize energy they can absorb in crashes using higher-strength steel and other materials.

"Structural changes are some of the longest lead time changes you can make," Vondale said, noting Ford is trying to accelerate improvements in strength design, especially on models in Europe eventually headed to the U.S market.

Jake Fisher, senior automotive engineer for Consumer Reports, said automakers are "getting smarter" about design and are using more aluminum and forged alloy materials that are strong, lighter and more expensive than steel.

Smaller SUVs and cars, he reasoned, may do a better job than heavier ones of avoiding accidents in the first place because they can stop more quickly and are easier to handle.

The experts also noted benefits of greater seat belt use, front and side air bags, roll control systems, anti-lock brakes, and collision avoidance technologies.

"I don't think the sky is falling," Fisher said.

(Editing by Maureen Bavdek)

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