

## **Statement of Joan Claybrook, President, Public Citizen**

**July 12, 2004**

Every year, enough people are killed in auto crashes to fill 172 airplanes. That's 43,000 people killed and 3 million injured. More than 10,600 of these deaths occur in rollover crashes yet, many could be prevented. The American public is paying for these crashes with their lives and with their wallets. Whether involved in a motor vehicle crash or not, we are all paying the bill.

Government studies show that motor vehicle crashes cost society more than \$230 billion annually. That translates into every person living in the United States paying an annual "crash tax" of \$792, with a family of four paying a total of \$3,168. It is time for Congress to reduce this tax burden on American families and save lives by enacting Title 4 of S.1072, the Safe and Flexible Transportation Efficiency Act of 2004.

This week is the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1984 issuance of the air bag safety standard that forced manufacturers to install this lifesaving device in vehicles after a fifteen-year battle. Today, we are asking Congress to end the decades long delay in protecting against rollover trauma and pass the vehicle safety provisions in S.1072. We want to celebrate the thousands of lives saved and injuries prevented in 2004.

The results of the Lou Harris Poll released today show that the American public is dying for basic, life-saving and cost-effective safety improvements in the vehicles they buy and drive even as the auto industry and Administration officials oppose these commonsense provisions in S.1072. And they are literally dying because these safety systems are not being installed.

On these critical auto safety matters, the government has delayed for years, and in some cases, decades, allowing thousands to continue being maimed and slaughtered on our roads. For instance, in 1971, the government announced plans to write a rollover prevention standard requiring vehicles to be stable. We still don't have a standard, because the government has been studying the issue for 30 years, thus automakers can churn out vehicles that are dangerously rollover-prone. For roof crush, the government issued a weak standard in 1971 that is failing to protect rollover occupants against deadly and debilitating brain and spinal cord injuries. Similarly, the government has thoroughly studied how and why people are ejected from vehicles during crashes but has done nothing to stop it.

In 2000, Congress passed legislation in the wake of the Ford/Firestone tragedy addressing tire safety and consumer information. But, as Sen. John McCain said on the Senate floor, "there is an unfinished agenda". Tragically, over thirty thousand rollover deaths have occurred since the Ford/Firestone legislation was passed. Still to be dealt with are roofs that crush in rollovers, vehicles that are dangerously prone to tipping during emergency maneuvers, and the increasing mismatch in the size of vehicles.

The SAFETEA legislation passed by the United States Senate under the leadership of Sen. John McCain and Sen. Fritz Hollings, with overwhelming bi-partisan support, addresses all of these deadly safety problems. The auto industry and the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) have acknowledged these dangers need to be corrected and no action has been taken.

The U.S. DOT has focused recently on increasing seat belt use but not on seat belt performance in a crash. Wearing your seat belt is critical but it is not enough. There is no safety standard for seat belts in rollover crashes and when the pillar crushes that anchors the roof and the belt, it undercuts belt safety.

The legislation bridges the safety gap that exists between what manufacturers are capable of installing in vehicles and what the government requires and what the public demands. This legislation sets a firm agenda to ensure that more years don't slip by while people die needlessly on the roads.

The highway bloodletting must stop. If Congress does not enact the safety measures in the six-year highway reauthorization bill the death toll over that period will exceed 258,000 fatalities and more than 18 million injuries. And, the imposition of the crash tax on every family will exceed \$19,000.

I would like to draw your attention to this chart that compares the costs to consumers of some key safety features that would become standard equipment under the legislation to the costs charged consumers for extra entertainment and style options that the auto industry offers on many makes and models. It is clear that the cost of safety improvements is modest by comparison and the public in the Lou Harris poll is willing to pay for the greater safety.

Every American family buying a new car today should not have to forgo life-saving safety technologies because it is not available or too expensive.

Critics of the legislation say we can't afford to offer these safety measures on every car. The public believes we can't afford to wait any longer. It is time to put safety first.

*\*Joan Claybrook was administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration from 1977-1981.*

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