

Securing America's Future Energy (SAFE) AV Event

Dr. Steven Cliff, NHTSA Acting Administrator

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REMARKS AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

Good afternoon, or good morning depending on where you're joining from and thank you, Robbie, for the invitation to be here virtually with you today. It's an exciting time in transportation, and I'm glad you're highlighting how technology may help improve safety and expand mobility for everyone.

I've been at NHTSA for three months now, and it's my honor to serve at the USDOT in the Biden-Harris Administration. I'm very glad to be joining this great team and for the opportunity to continue to serve the American people.

In my time here, I've seen firsthand how dedicated NHTSA's 600-plus employees are to the agency's mission – to save lives and reduce crashes on our nation's roads. Everything we do will be focused on achieving this mission while making transportation more environmentally responsible, and more equitable.

I say that because we can achieve all of those goals – we don't have to pick just one. We can have safe transportation while making smart environmental choices and addressing historical inequities.

Which brings me to one of the Biden-Harris Administration's major priorities – climate change. As President Biden said recently at the White House, "We've already waited too long to deal with this climate crisis, and we can't wait any longer."

Our future, our children's future, depends on what we do right now to address climate change. To reverse the path that we're on, we must look at all sources of emissions, starting with the largest – transportation.

We know we cannot address climate change without addressing the role passenger cars and light trucks play in rising CO2 emissions. The President's call to action on climate change will drive much of our work at the USDOT and NHTSA, starting with the Corporate Average Fuel Economy, or CAFE, rule.

Just hours after taking the oath of office, President Biden signed an executive order directing the U.S. Department of Transportation to immediately review the two SAFE Vehicles Rules issued last summer.

The executive order frames these reviews, and many others, as actions "to advance environmental justice." We've since issued a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking in response to that executive order that proposes to withdraw the so-called "SAFE I" rule that intended to preempt state transportation GHG and ZEV emissions standards. We are hard at work evaluating the SAFE II rule, which set fuel economy standards through 2026.

Climate and air pollution disproportionately impact low income and communities of color. And to truly transform our environmental future, we must change how vehicles are powered – moving to zero emissions. President Biden's American Jobs Plan will invest \$174 billion to accelerate the electric vehicle revolution and move us toward a zero-emission future. His plan will help spur domestic supply chains

from raw materials to parts, retool factories to compete globally, and support American workers to make batteries and EVs.

It would also create a network of 500,000 charging stations nationwide – a critical investment to ensure widespread EV adoption. And the American Jobs Plan would give consumers rebates for buying EVs, helping to speed up the transition to electrification and spread the benefits of EV ownership to more Americans, not just the wealthy. I've had a lot of discussions with the automotive industry, and know they support the American Jobs Plan's goals, recognizing that the future lies in renewable energy and electrification, not in gasoline-powered engines.

This will help Americans across the country, including rural areas where people drive the longest distances and stand to save the most by not having to pay for gas.

These EV investments will also be critical to ensuring that the vehicles of the future are built right here in the U.S. This is part of the millions of good jobs that the American Jobs Plan will create.

There will undoubtedly be many challenges along the way, but also great opportunities. We will not reach zero emissions overnight, so it is important to ensure that cars and trucks with internal combustion engines sold today and in the future are as efficient as possible. NHTSA will play a key role in the push to electrification and in requiring the maximum feasible improvements in fuel economy. We need to do more, we can do more, and we will do more.

And that applies to safety, as well. Safety is the reason NHTSA was created more than 50 years ago. Our mission is to save lives and reduce injuries on our nation's roads. And just as we ask you to join us in reducing harmful pollution, we do the same when it comes to road safety.

Safety is even more important right now, as we are facing a unique crisis on our roads caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Early in the crisis, NHTSA identified a rise in risky driving behaviors on our roads. As health officials reminded us to limit ourselves to essential trips, many drivers stayed home. But some of those who were out on our roads were more likely to engage in risky actions, such as not wearing a seat belt, speeding, or driving after using drugs and/or alcohol.

As a result, traffic crash fatalities in the first nine months of 2020 increased by about 4.6 percent, all while vehicle miles traveled actually decreased by about 14.5 percent. All told, this translates into about a 20% increase in the fatality rate for that same period last year.

That should motivate each of us to work harder to develop solutions and collaborate to help curb these risky behaviors and save lives. NHTSA is educating drivers about the most common, dangerous driving behaviors – driving impaired, driving without a seat belt, driving distracted, and driving at high speeds.

And we also believe that when applied smartly, technology, including advanced vehicle technologies, can help address these dangerous behaviors and save lives.

AVs – or as we call them, automated driving systems – are generally in the development phase, and being tested in limited conditions on public roads.

Still, they hold great promise to one day improve safety, as well as the possibility to expand mobility and accessibility for seniors and people with disabilities, as well as improving transportation equity in underserved communities.

Surveys show the public largely remains skeptical about ADS-equipped vehicles, and building public trust will be the key to widespread adoption. It's not enough just to develop the technology; the public has to trust that it's safe for themselves and their families. While ADS-equipped vehicles may hold safety benefits, these benefits may never be realized if the public rejects the technology.

As we have seen in other areas of technology, the public has a very low tolerance for what we call machine errors. Errors that a human driver may make become that much more unnerving when made by a computer system. When it comes to widespread adoption of ADS, aiming for "as good as a human driver" may not be enough. As ADS vehicles are tested and deployed, transparency can help ensure the public understands how the technology works and the safeguards in place. The entire industry, from manufacturers to operators, needs to be as transparent with challenges as they are with opportunities and breakthroughs.

And transparency is important to us at NHTSA as well. Our AV TEST Initiative includes a public-facing website where anyone can learn about on-road testing and deployment of ADS vehicles in their communities. And we will use every tool at our disposal to gather data, better understand emerging issues, and ensure the safety of the public.

As ADS development continues, we encourage everyone in the space to consider how these vehicles can expand mobility for seniors, people with disabilities, and underserved communities. These vehicles could one day serve people who are not able to drive themselves, or who have been reliant on sparse bus networks. However, they need to be designed with the needs of many different users, and that includes protections and user interfaces to meet the needs of people of all sizes, genders, ages, and mobility. Equity cannot be an afterthought – it needs to be considered and addressed throughout the process.

We also cannot forget about child safety. Just as the safety of children in our personal vehicles is critical, so must be the safety of children in the design and deployment of ADS-equipped vehicles. We encourage the industry to consider how to better protect children in unconventional seating configurations, how to ensure effective child restraint system installations and usage in ride-share service models, and how to plan for emerging risks involving unattended children. Again, this goes back to ensuring the public trust. Families who do not feel ADS vehicles are safe for their children will never adopt the technology.

As ADS technology develops, we will continue to engage with developers and testers to ensure the public's safety. We also look forward to hearing from stakeholders like you as we release new proposals and policies. In fact, please stay tuned for more about our agency's regulatory priorities on safety, ADS technology, and equity in the Spring Unified Agenda.

While ADS technology isn't available for purchase to the public, advanced driver assistance systems, or ADAS, are here now! They can help reduce the severity of crashes and perhaps even prevent them – but only if they are used correctly.

Since ADAS can encompass many technologies, people need to know what their car can do – and even more importantly, what it can't do. As names for these features vary by manufacturer, and some technologies warn a driver while others take momentary action for the driver, there's a serious

education challenge here. NHTSA continues to educate drivers about the features in their vehicles, as well as their limitations.

As technology develops, I want to assure you of my deep and abiding commitment to NHTSA's safety mission. We will remain vigilant in our oversight role and will act when appropriate.

Technology is moving fast, so we have important work ahead of us.

As I've outlined over the past few minutes, this is a time of great change – but one that has the potential to revolutionize the way we live and travel. The industry is moving toward more automation, but that must come with the promise of improved safety and better environmental practices.

This moment, with the American Jobs Plan currently moving through Congress, is also an opportunity to address inequities and racial disparities that have been perpetuated for generations. We believe we can have it all; we can build a transportation system that creates a safer, more equitable and sustainable world for ourselves and future generations. And in building it, we can create millions of good jobs that last for a long time to come.

Thank you so much for your time today.