Automated Road Transportation Symposium Plenary Remarks

Dr. Steven Cliff, NHTSA Administrator

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Garden Grove, California

Good morning, and I'm so glad to be here with you in person today. Egan, thank you for that introduction – it's good to see you and so many folks from USDOT.

I want to acknowledge the hard work of everyone who organized this important event, including the planning committee and the approximately 100 volunteers who make ARTS possible.

NHTSA and the Transportation Research Board have a long, fruitful partnership that advances safety. As a TRB veteran member, I know that TRB supports not only important research but brings experts together from across the country to share, collaborate and inspire. NHTSA's relationship with TRB is important and one I will continue to support as Administrator.

As most of you know, NHTSA's work touches every person in the United States every day. Our work focuses on making our roads safer for everyone while also making transportation more environmentally friendly and equitable.

At NHTSA, safety is literally our middle name, and we've been committed to it for more than 50 years.

The commitment to safety is also true across USDOT, but it feels most urgent on our nation's roadways. 95 percent of all transportation-related deaths in this country are traffic fatalities. Each life lost is tragic, and the loss of more than 40,000 lives last year on our roadways is unacceptable.

We are committed to improving safety for all road users – not just drivers and passengers, but pedestrians, cyclists, children, motorcyclists, older Americans, and people with disabilities.

The Department's National Roadway Safety Strategy adopts the safe system approach and identifies action items for everyone working to save lives on the road.

The safe system approach is people focused, meaning that the system serves the needs of its users, not the other way around.

DOT's National Roadway Safety Strategy is implementing the safe system approach by focusing on Safer People, Safer Vehicles, Safer Roads, Safer Speeds, and Post-Crash Care.

Speaking of Safer Speeds – yesterday, we launched our first-ever national speeding prevention campaign with an event in downtown Los Angeles. Our Speeding Wrecks Lives campaign hit the airwaves this morning, reminding everyone that speeding is always unsafe. You'll likely see one of our English or Spanish ads soon.

And as we continue to move forward on the safe system approach, we can't forget the voices of those who use the roads, particularly those in communities of color, underrepresented communities, and people with disabilities. Communities of color are overrepresented in pedestrian fatalities, for example.

By focusing on infrastructure improvements where pedestrian fatalities are concentrated, encouraging slower speeds, and working on a rulemaking to require pedestrian automated emergency braking, DOT is attacking the problem from multiple angles.

We're finalizing some new research, and preliminary data suggest road travel is riskier for Black, American Indian, and Alaska Native travelers than for white people. The disparity persists even when accounting for the amount and type of travel.

These preliminary data also suggest that men die in greater numbers than women, but women face greater risks of injury and death in crashes. NHTSA's safety measures have helped close the gap and protected countless lives. But we still have a lot of work to do by using every available tool – rulemaking, infrastructure improvements, better post-crash care, and reductions in risky behaviors.

We are committed to saving lives, and this new research shows why we need the safe system approach. After all, equity cannot be an afterthought – it needs to be considered and addressed throughout the process.

I see tremendous opportunity to integrate our safe system approach from the beginning in the deployment of vehicles with automated driving systems, or ADS.

As we're thinking about the next phase of our work, in addition to safety as the foundation, we envision that these vehicles will also address accessibility, equity and environmental concerns.

We encourage everyone to consider how ADS vehicles can expand mobility for seniors, people with disabilities, and underserved communities. These vehicles could one day serve people who cannot drive themselves or have been reliant on sparse transit networks. Individuals would be able to enjoy independence without relying on others for a ride.

However, these vehicles should be designed for many different users. That includes protections and user interfaces to meet the needs of people of all ages, incomes, neighborhoods, and mobility considerations.

While we all recognize that ADS-equipped vehicles can offer tremendous opportunities at their maturity, and many in the sector are working to reach that point, NHTSA is committed to assuring this is all done safely.

In March, we issued a first-of-its-kind final rule to ensure the safety of occupants in ADS vehicles. This rule updates the occupant protection Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards to account for vehicles without traditional manual controls.

As the driver changes from a person to a machine in ADS-equipped vehicles, the need to keep people safe remains the same and must be integrated from the beginning. With this rule, we ensure that manufacturers put safety first.

Some of you may be familiar with NHTSA's so-called part 555 temporary exemption process, where a manufacturer can petition for an exemption from a specific Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard for deployment of the vehicle. Each petition is examined carefully, and safety is always prioritized.

This week, NHTSA is publishing two notices of receipt for petitions from manufacturers seeking exemptions for ADS vehicles. General Motors is petitioning for a temporary exemption from certain

requirements in six Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards for its purpose-built ADS-equipped vehicle, the Cruise Origin. And Ford is requesting a temporary exemption from certain requirements in seven FMVSS for its ADS-equipped vehicles.

With this notice, the public will be able to weigh in with comments. Once the comment period closes, NHTSA will review these comments, evaluate the petitions' merits, and determine whether granting them is in the public interest. And as I said earlier, safety will be paramount as we decide whether to grant or deny these petitions, just as it is with everything we do. But accessibility, equity and environmental protection will also be crucial.

NHTSA is leveraging every tool we have to advance the safety of new and developing technologies. The agency has robust authorities to protect the public, investigate potential safety issues, and compel recalls when it finds evidence of noncompliance or an unreasonable risk to safety.

To more effectively do this, we need critical safety data as soon as they're available. Data are NHTSA's lifeblood because we base all our decisions on facts, research, and thorough analysis.

Last summer, NHTSA expanded the data we collect by issuing a Standing General Order requiring crash and incident reporting for vehicles equipped with ADS as well as Level 2 advanced driver assistance systems.

For those of you wondering, yes, the order applies to prototype systems being tested on public roads.

This Standing General Order provides NHTSA with additional data on crashes involving vehicles where ADS or Level 2 ADAS systems were engaged or used just before the crash. Reports are required for all ADS crashes and for serious ADAS crashes.

This is improving safety and transparency by providing the agency with critical and timely safety data that we are also making available to the public. These data help our investigators quickly identify potential defect trends that could emerge in these systems, warranting further exploration.

Last month, we published the first 10 months of data, and last week we published an additional month's worth of data. Let me share some observations.

Since the reporting requirements began through June 15, one crash reported for an ADS-equipped vehicle resulted in serious injuries. And 119 of the crashes resulted in no injuries.

Of the reported ADS crashes, 118 involved collisions with another vehicle, and 15 involved a vulnerable road user, such as a pedestrian or cyclist.

For vehicles with SAE Level 2 ADAS, the data show that alleged serious injuries or a fatality occurred in 12 of the 109 crashes where information on injuries was reported.

Of the reported ADAS crashes, at least 134 of the collisions were with another vehicle, and at least four involved a vulnerable road user.

There are a few caveats to our SGO data. Keep in mind these data are not contextualized by vehicle miles traveled or the number of units in the fleet. Therefore, the number of incident reports an entity files is inadequate to draw conclusions regarding safety.

And different manufacturers have different access to crash reports, with those companies that receive instantaneous telematics information potentially learning about and reporting more crashes than those without.

We will continue updating the data on our website each month. Transparency is essential to us, and I'm sure these data will interest many of you.

We launched this effort because we NEED safety built in at every stage of a vehicle's development. Driver assistance technologies and automation are no exception. These technologies hold great promise to improve safety, but we need to understand how the vehicles perform in real-world situations.

NHTSA stands ready to use our enforcement authority to hold manufacturers accountable if they introduce products – ADS, or any other equipment – that may introduce an unreasonable risk to safety.

One ADS recall has already been issued, thanks to these new data. We've also opened multiple investigations into several manufacturers regarding potential safety defects in ADAS systems.

We take our oversight – and responsibility to the American people – very seriously.

ADS technologies offer an opportunity to rethink much of our society. In addition to the equity concerns I raised earlier, ADS can help us reconsider land use development and curb space allocation in communities.

For example, public spaces can be transformed if parking can be devoted to other uses such as parks, gardens, or housing. We saw a bit of this during the pandemic, as parking spaces turned into patio seating to help restaurants stay afloat – and gave people new ways to enjoy the fresh air outdoors.

Think about how our downtowns and communities could be rethought and revitalized if we weren't allocating so much free space to parking!

With thoughtful planning, ADS technologies can also potentially improve air pollution, leading to better public health outcomes and traffic congestion too.

We expect that ADS vehicles will be zero emissions – because that's the way of the future. And that future needs to be cleaner, safer, and more equitable.

The policy decisions we make today, and the priorities we set, can positively influence the development of innovative technologies.

As our transportation system continues to evolve, there will undoubtedly be great opportunities, and some challenges, along the way. This is an exciting time in transportation; a time of significant change – but one that has the potential to revolutionize the way we live, work, and travel.

While the industry is moving toward more automation and electrification, that should come with the promise of improved safety and better environmental practices. If done carefully, changes in the automotive sector also provide an opportunity to address inequities and racial disparities that have been perpetuated for generations.

Together, we can create a more equitable, sustainable, safer world for ourselves and future generations. Thank you so much for your time today.