



August 19, 2022

The Honorable Steven Cliff
Administrator
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
United States Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

RE: Docket No. NHTSA-2022-0066, Docket No. NHTSA-2022-0067

Dear Dr. Cliff:

The National Federation of the Blind appreciates the opportunity to comment on the petitions for temporary exemption submitted by Ford Motor Company (Ford) and General Motors (GM) regarding the development and road testing of fully autonomous vehicles. Pursuant to Title 49 U.S.C. § 30113, the Secretary of Transportation may grant a temporary exemption from a motor vehicle safety standard if the “exemption is consistent with the public interest” and if it meets one of four other requirements, of which one reads “the exemption would make easier the development or field evaluation of a new motor vehicle safety feature providing a safety level at least equal to the safety level of the standard.” The National Federation of the Blind represents a population of Americans that will significantly benefit from the deployment of autonomous vehicles if equal access is planned from the beginning. With that interest in mind, we have reviewed this matter and believe that the exemptions sought by Ford and GM in order to further the development of fully autonomous vehicles meet both of those requirements, and that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) should therefore recommend to the Secretary that they be granted.

Each petition identifies multiple Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS) from which exemptions are being sought. Three of the standards, No. 102, No. 108, and No. 111, are mentioned in both petitions. According to NHTSA’s request for comment, FMVSS No. 102 requires the gear selection shift positions to be visibly identified for the benefit of the human driver. We agree with the position of both Ford and GM that if a human is merely an occupant of the vehicle, and is in no way controlling the driving functions, there is no need for this information to be visibly displayed. Furthermore, as one of the primary beneficiaries of this potential future technology, requiring that the vehicle gear selection position be visibly displayed in fully autonomous vehicles is of no use to blind users.

Portions of FMVSS No. 108 require manual controls and indicators regarding the selection of lighting modes outside the vehicle. Again, we agree with the position of Ford and GM that in the

absence of a human driver, these controls are unnecessary. Ford further posits that if left to the control of the human occupants in the vehicle, they may choose a lighting option that “could adversely affect the ADS’s [automated driving system] driving action, causing confusion and reducing safety for other road users and/or the ADS-equipped vehicle.” If allowing the vehicle occupants to have control of the lighting options may potentially reduce the safety of those occupants or other road users, then it would be less safe than the current standard. We believe this exemption must be granted to ensure the further development of fully autonomous vehicles can proceed safely.

The third area of exemption mentioned in both the Ford and GM petition is FMVSS No. 111, which is in regard to rearview visibility. Both Ford and GM note that the fully autonomous driving system will be in control of all driving operations, including reversing the vehicle, which would mean that displaying the area behind the vehicle to the occupants will not be necessary. The GM petition further states that rearview mirrors and display are “based on human perception and visibility so there is no operational safety need for these requirements when applied to a vehicle driven by an ADS.” We agree with both petitions in this area and urge that this exemption be granted.

Additionally, Ford is requesting an exemption from FMVSS No. 135 which requires a foot control for actuating the service brakes and a parking brake that is actuated by either a hand or foot. As mentioned in the other requested areas of exemption, in a fully autonomous vehicle, the human occupants will have no control over the driving operation of the vehicle, therefore rendering the requirement for control of the braking system to be unnecessary. Ford maintains that braking performance will not be altered or lessened in any way; the control of the operation will simply be transferred from a human driver to the vehicle itself. In keeping with NHTSA’s requirements to further the development of fully automated vehicle technology in a safe manner, we urge that this exemption be granted.

The GM petition similarly requests exemptions from portions of FMVSS No. 104 and No. 201, both of which are in regard to visibility and perception for the needs of a human driver. Specifically, FMVSS No. 104 is in regard to windshield wipers, which GM maintains are not necessary for the operation of the fully automated vehicle’s sensors and that the sensors do not rely the ability to perceive the outside of the vehicle through the windshield. In that regard, windshield wipers on a fully automated vehicle are rendered unnecessary. Furthermore, FMVSS No. 201 requires the positioning of a sun visor for each front seating position. Again, because the fully automated vehicle’s suite of sensors does not rely on the ability to be able to see through the front windshield in order to drive, this requirement is now unnecessary. We therefore urge that this exemption be granted.

In short, while we certainly understand the possible risks associated with this new technology, we also firmly believe that the potential benefits, particularly to blind Americans and other Americans with disabilities, far outweigh those risks. In order to take a true leadership role on the world stage in this venture, we must not be fearful of taking risks simply because we are afraid of change. There will undoubtedly be issues that need sorted out along the way, as there were undoubtedly issues in the transition to the automobile from horses as the main mode of transportation at the dawn of the twentieth century, but we still made room for testing, development, experimentation, and ultimately progress. With such a significant paradigm shift, we acknowledge that some

challenges are inevitable, but as John F. Kennedy once said, “There are risks and costs to action, but they are far less than the long range risks of comfortable inaction.”

As the nation’s transformative membership and advocacy organization of blind Americans, the National Federation of the Blind understands the transformative capabilities fully autonomous vehicles can and will have on the lives of the blind. Therefore we stand ready to assist in any way that we can to ensure that this technology is developed and proliferated safely and efficiently onto America’s roadways.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mark A. Riccobono", with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Mark A. Riccobono, President
National Federation of the Blind