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Pallone Statement at Automobile Safety and NHTSA Oversight Hearing

Energy and Commerce Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-NJ) today gave the following opening statement at a Commerce, Manufacturing and Trade Subcommittee Hearing on automobile safety and oversight of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).

Thank you, Chairman Burgess, for calling this hearing so that we can discuss NHTSA's critical mission of making our roads safer and how Congress can best support that mission.

It is an exciting time in the automotive world right now. From vehicle-to-vehicle communication, to self-parking cars, to automatic braking—it seems we are in the midst of a major technological shift in the way we drive our cars.

And while some may want to focus this hearing on the future of the automobile—and I do want to hear that NHTSA and industry have the tools and skills necessary to deal with the ever-changing landscape—we must address the deficiencies that already are plaguing this industry.

Over the last several years, we have seen massive and highly publicized recalls for General Motors ignition switches, Takata airbags, and Toyota unintended acceleration. Unfortunately, 2015 was another record-setting year for auto recalls, which erodes the public's trust, and the underlying defects put people in danger. Just last night, we learned that yet another death has been linked to a faulty Takata airbag.

And while some recalls may always occur, industry must take responsibility for its own failures and do more to prevent safety deficiencies from putting the public at risk. NHTSA also must stay ahead of the curve on safety and that starts with having the willingness and conviction to effect real change both within NHTSA and throughout the industry.

Last year was not only a record-setting year on recalls, we also, unfortunately, saw a rise in traffic fatalities. According to NHTSA projections, deaths increased 9.3 percent to 26,000 people in the first nine months of 2015, compared with the same period in 2014. There was also

a 30 percent rise in serious injuries in the first half of 2015, compared with the first half of 2014, up to nearly 2.3 million serious injuries.

In January, the Department of Transportation announced an agreement on safety principles between NHTSA and 18 major auto manufacturers. While the agreement covers broad areas of auto safety, it is severely lacking in meaningful details. It's nothing more than agreement to try to agree in the future. I also have serious reservations about the closed-door process by which this agreement was drafted and finalized. And it concerns me that it lacks an enforcement mechanism to ensure that automakers follow through on their commitments, as vague as they may be.

In the wake of an auto emissions scandal, a climbing recall rate, and rising traffic fatalities, now is the time for greater accountability, greater transparency, and better communication between automakers and the agency charged with regulating them, as well as the public; not just a set of voluntary principles.

Last year, Congress passed a transportation funding bill—the FAST Act. That legislation was a missed opportunity to address accountability, transparency, and communications. It also should have dealt with used car safety, speeding up the recall process, and eliminating regional recalls, among other things.

The Vehicle Safety Improvement Act of 2015, a bill that Ranking Member Schakowsky and I introduced last year, would make those changes, and more. Our bill is a starting point to make sure that the millions of drivers and passengers on our roads are kept safe.

This year is the 50th anniversary of the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966, the law that created NHTSA with its mission of reducing deaths, injuries, and economic losses resulting from motor vehicle crashes. The Auto Alliance has stated that fatalities as a share of miles travelled are down 80 percent since the law's passage.

We need to continue that legacy—not move backwards. We are on our way toward incredible advances in the automotive space—but we need to ensure that consumers get there safely.

I look forward to continuing our discussion about how best to move forward on auto safety.

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