

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN FOR AIR BAGS ANNOUNCED

From National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

■(WASHINGTON) The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) last week announced a comprehensive approach to preserve the important safety benefit of air bags while minimizing their danger to children and at-risk adults.

The agency announced its approach centers on accelerating the development of "smart air bag" technology for future vehicles with the intent of having the systems available in fall 1998 for 1999 models. More immediate measures include adoption of enhanced warning labels, depowering of air bags and continuing to allow the use of cutoff switches in vehicles without a rear seat to protect children.

NHTSA Administrator Ricardo Martinez, M.D., said, "The safety of the motoring public is our highest priority. Air bags are working well, but need to be improved to enhance the safety of children and small stature adults. These comprehensive measures will maintain the safety benefits of air bags, decrease their potential hazard to children and at-risk adults, and provide consumers with important safety information.

Administrator Martinez added that while these steps will enhance the safety of vehicle occupants in the interim, the effort can only be fully completed with the development and use of "smart" air bag technology.

The agency will propose setting a phase-in schedule for the next generation of air bags to begin in fall 1998 for 1999 models. With the growth of research and competition in air bag technology, NHTSA believes that "smart bags" will provide significantly greater safety in frontal crash protection, and wants to encourage both their rapid development and design flexibility. Smart bags will effectively "tailor" the deployment to the size of the occupant and the crash circumstances.

The other intermediate safety measures are:

- ✓ Improved warning labels. The agency announced the adoption of a final rule requiring new, highly visible warning labels for all new cars and light trucks beginning in 90 days and in effect until "smart" air bags are available. The labels will be affixed to both sides of the sun visors making them visible when the visors are either up or down. In addition, new vehicles will be required to have a prominent warning label affixed to the center of the dashboard as a strong,

clearly visible reminder at the time of delivery.

- ✓ A final rule also announced last week requires a new, highly visible air bag danger warning label on child safety seats.

- ✓ Depowering for safety. NHTSA will propose that air bags be depowered between 20-35 percent to reduce the deployment force for added safety. Once adopted, depowered air bags would be permitted until smart air bag technology is phased into new cars.

- ✓ Cutoff Switches for Vehicles with No Rear Seat. NHTSA will issue a final rule extending its existing policy of permitting manufacturers to install manual cutoff switches in vehicles without a back seat, or with a back seat that is too small to install a child safety seat.

- ✓ Option for Owners of Air Bag-Equipped Vehicles. The agency will propose allowing dealers to deactivate the air bags of any owner who requests it. Currently, NHTSA permits deactivation on a case-by-case basis. The new policy would permit families who need to have children in the front seat for medical monitoring purposes, car pools with front-seated children, short-stature individuals, and others who have reasonable concerns about a potential danger to turn the air bag off. Automobile dealers will be asked to help their customers make informed decisions by providing them with NHTSA guidance on the benefits and dangers of deactivating the air bag system, and would be required to install a label indicating that the air bag has been disabled.

- ✓ Increased public awareness. NHTSA will increase its own air bag public aware-

ness activities and coordinate them with information efforts underway by the national Air Bag Safety Campaign, the coalition that it organized last year involving car companies, insurers and safety groups. It also plans a national distribution of copies of a warning label, using state motor vehicle offices, fast food chains, convenience stores and other outlets, and is using its popular public service characters, "Vince and Larry," to help convey information about air bag dangers as part of their seat belt message.

- ✓ Expanded Research Program. NHTSA is also announcing an expanded research program to improve the testing of air bags and crash protection for children and women. Recently, NHTSA received the support of the international research community, including government and industry representatives, to place a priority on this needed research.

"Overall, air bags are working well and are responsible for an 11 percent reduction in driver fatalities in passenger cars, including a 30 percent reduction in fatalities in head-on crashes. They are credited with saving more than 1,500 lives since 1986 when they began appearing in the U.S. fleet," Dr. Martinez said.

Regarding our proposal to allow air bags to be disconnected, we expect that very few will need to take this extreme action, and those who do will be made aware of the risks involved, Dr. Martinez said. You can greatly reduce the risk of air bag injury by being buckled and back from the air bag.

Consumers who have questions or concerns about air bags should contact the agency's toll-free Auto Safety Hotline at (800) 424-9393.

