

Opening Statement of Chairman Greg Walden
Subcommittee on Digital Commerce and Consumer Protection
Hearing on “Self-Driving Cars: Levels of Automation”
March 28, 2017

(As prepared for delivery)

Following years of declining traffic fatalities, there has been a sharp rise in vehicle-related deaths over the past two years. According to early estimates, over 40,000 people lost their lives on our nation’s roads last year, marking a six percent increase from 2015. In Oregon, 2016 was the deadliest year on the roads in more than a decade, up 20 percent from the year before. These are sobering numbers.

The development of self-driving cars could be a solution to this uptick in danger facing the driving public. The main question is: how do we get there?

Last month, this subcommittee examined how automakers and other entities are testing self-driving cars and preparing this innovative safety technology for commercial deployment. Just about everyone concedes that fully self-driving cars are still years away from getting into the hands of consumers; but, that has not stopped the automotive industry from laying the foundation for complete vehicle autonomy.

Today, many cars on the market are equipped with active safety features or semi-autonomous driving systems. These systems have the potential to keep a vehicle within its designated lane; accelerate to pass another vehicle; change lanes; brake; and park – all without the input of a human driver. These advanced driver - assistance systems or crash-avoidance technologies represent the building blocks to a fully self-driving car.

Gradually allowing the vehicle to perform parts of the driving task absent human control means that vehicles are steadily learning how to operate alone and consumers are progressively becoming more familiar and more comfortable with automated driving systems.

The advancement of driver assistance systems over the last decade is already demonstrating this progression, as this technology is minimizing crashes, reducing injuries, and decreasing insurance claims. In recognition of the safety benefits provided by these systems, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

has begun work to formally incorporate many of these technologies into its 5-Star Safety Ratings program.

Today's hearing will look more closely at many of the advanced driver assistance systems and crash avoidance technologies on the road. Our witnesses will also help us to understand the different levels of driving automation; how these technologies are improving safety; and how the development of driver assistance systems and technologies is paving the way for fully self-driving cars.

We often say that the development of self-driving cars is a life-saving endeavor. Following a devastating year on our nation's roads, this could not be truer now. I look forward to a thoughtful and engaging discussion on the levels of driving automation and how advanced driver assistance systems can lead us to a future of full vehicle autonomy.