



COMMITTEE ON
ENERGY & COMMERCE
DEMOCRATS
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Pallone: Safety Must Be Top Priority in Self-Driving Car Deployment

Washington, D.C. – *Energy and Commerce Ranking Member Frank Pallone, Jr. (D-NJ) delivered the following opening remarks at a Digital Commerce and Consumer Protection Subcommittee hearing on “Self-Driving Vehicle Legislation”:*

This Subcommittee has been reviewing automated vehicle technology for some time. As we have heard, there are a number of potential benefits both for safety and mobility in the deployment of self-driving cars. There are also challenges to their deployment, such as increased cybersecurity and privacy exposure risks and safety issues regarding the interaction between human-operated and computer-operated vehicles. We all share the goal of promoting the safest possible transportation options.

Before us today are 14 separate legislative bills that deal with some of the deployment issues. I support efforts that help get new technological advances on the roads faster, but we must review each bill through our safety lens. Only if we keep “safety first” as our mantra can we get these initiatives to a place where they are ready to become law.

Although the minority was not involved in the development of these 14 bills, I would like to hold you, Mr. Chairman, to your commitment to work to make this a bipartisan effort. My goal is crafting a single bipartisan bill that all members can support.

Right now, there are some challenges to getting there, starting with the leadership vacuum at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. We should not be moving bills out of Committee before we hear from the Administration about how the bills would, or could, be implemented. And yet, once again, we have nobody here today to testify from the Administration.

The little we have heard from NHTSA is troubling. The President’s Budget Estimates submitted to Congress this spring shows NHTSA focusing on deregulatory actions that are in direct conflict with what Congress required it to do. Despite Congressional mandates, NHTSA wants to stop important safety laws. Inexcusably, the agency is resisting critical

safety measures designed to ensure blind pedestrians know a quiet car is nearby or that parents or grandparents do not unintentionally back-over their little children.

While the bills before us deal with a number of industry requests, such as increases to the current exemptions limit or how FOIA requests are handled, there are no directions to NHTSA. NHTSA must have an active role for self-driving cars to be successfully deployed on our roads. There also is no direction on the issues of cybersecurity, data security, or privacy.

As we look forward to this new world of self-driving cars, we must also ensure that we promote safety, which includes ensuring NHTSA fulfills its responsibilities both in this emerging area as well as with human-driven cars.

We cannot focus on the future at the expense of today. As Ranking Member Schakowsky pointed out, a number of things can be done right now to make traditional cars safer. Most of the auto industry have committed to making automatic emergency braking standard in all cars. This is a technology that we know promotes safety, and some automakers have already met that commitment, but others are delaying such action. When we know a technology makes people safer, it should be put into all cars as quickly as possible.

In addition, the legislation we discuss now should not be the end of the conversation. One recurring theme throughout this Subcommittee's disruptor series is that technology is advancing extremely quickly. Today's new technology could be obsolete by next year. Self-driving vehicle technology is very much in the development phase, and it's almost impossible to foresee all the issues that may arise. So we can't allow the actions we take now to stop us from addressing new issues that come up later or from revisiting some issues that may change in the future.

This is a big moment for us. Automated vehicles have the potential to change everything: how we move, what communities look like, how we interact with each other. We need to be sure that we get this right and that safety is the first priority.

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