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New York Auto Show

Officials mandate anti-rollover rule

Experts say vehicles with electronic stability control can save up to 10,000 lives each year.

David Shepardson / Detroit News Washington Bureau

NEW YORK -- The government on Thursday made official its mandate that all vehicles come with anti-rollover technology by the 2012 model year, even pushing ahead the phase-in schedule for electronic stability control because of its ability to protect motorists.

"This technology will save thousands of lives. Like air bags and seat belts, 10 years down the road we will look back at the new ESC technology and wonder how we ever drove a car without it," U.S. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters said, after a tour of auto exhibits here at the New York Auto Show.

The technology can help motorists avoid skidding on icy or slick roads, or keep control of their car when swerving to avoid something in the road. Electronic stability control senses when a driver may lose control of the vehicle and automatically applies brakes to individual wheels to help stabilize it and avoid a rollover.

The technology could reduce rollovers by 84 percent, preventing between 5,300 and 9,600 deaths annually and up to 238,000 injuries a year once all vehicles are equipped with it, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

More than 10,000 people a year die in rollover accidents, even though 3 percent of crashes involve rollovers.

"ESC will put the brakes on crashes and help drivers keep control of their cars in critical situations," NHTSA Administrator Nicole Nason said.

The rule requires automakers to have 55 percent of their vehicles equipped with ESC by the 2009 model year, 75 percent by 2010 and 95 percent by 2011, with full compliance by 2012. The preliminary rule had those percentages at 30, 60 and 90.

Automakers support the regulation. In fact, Toyota will make ESC standard on all vehicles by the end of 2009, and Ford Motor Co. and General Motors Corp. announced last year they would beat NHTSA's deadline by one year. DaimlerChrysler AG has said only it would comply with the new rules.

Currently, ESC is in about 40 percent of all 2007 model vehicles and 90 percent of SUVs, up from just 29 percent of all 2006 vehicles. The technology is currently more likely to be in luxury vehicles than in some entry-level sedans.

Continental Automotive Systems this year will ship more than 10 million ESC units worldwide, accounting for about 40 percent of the market. The German auto supplier and tire company, with a unit in Auburn Hills, will produce nearly half of all the ESC units sold in the United States.

"This is like a copilot," said Continental North America CEO and President William Kozytra, who is based in Auburn Hills. "This has the potential to save more than 10,000 lives annually and serve as the platform for other safety advances," like rear crash avoidance and lane departure warning systems.

"This is a major advancement for auto safety," he said.

Continental has made significant investments in its plants in Europe, Asia and the United States to meet the increase in demand for ESC.

Rule has 50-mph test

Under the final regulation, automakers' systems must pass a 50-mph test that's severe enough speed to produce spinouts in vehicles without ESC.

The rule also requires that vehicles have an indicator light on the dashboard warning drivers if the ESC system isn't working. Unlike most government safety regulations, NHTSA is mandating some specific equipment -- rather than a performance standard.

NHTSA says adding ESC to all vehicles will cost the industry \$985 million. It will cost about \$111 per vehicle on those that already include antilock brakes, or a total of \$479 per vehicle for those without ABS.

But the benefits far outweigh the costs, NHTSA said.

With the exception of seat belts, ESC "provides the greatest potential to help protect motor vehicle occupants and help save lives," said Beth Lowery, GM's vice president of energy, environment and safety.

NHTSA noted that the ESC mandate is one aspect of its comprehensive plan to address rollovers. The agency still must release a final regulation on roof strength, an issue it has been studying since 1991. The current roof regulation was essentially written by Ford and GM in the early 1970s.

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The new rule

All new vehicles will be required to have anti-rollover technology called electronic stability control (ESC) by the 2012 model year. ESC senses when a driver may lose control of the vehicle and automatically applies brakes to individual wheels to help stabilize it and avoid a rollover.

The rule requires automakers to have 55 percent of their vehicles equipped with ESC by the 2009 model year, 75 percent by 2010 and 95 percent by 2011, with full compliance by 2012.

The rule applies to new vehicles under 10,000 pounds.

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