



POLICY & ACTION FROM CONSUMER REPORTS

November 13, 2017

U.S. Department of Transportation
Office of the Under Secretary for Policy
Attn: Strategic Plan Comments
1200 New Jersey Avenue S.E.
Washington, D.C. 20590

Submitted by email to dotstrategicplanning@dot.gov.

**Comments of Consumers Union to the U.S. Department of Transportation on the
Draft DOT Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2018-2022
Docket No. DOT-OST-2009-0092**

Consumers Union, the policy and mobilization division of Consumer Reports,¹ welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Draft Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2018-2022 developed by the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT). We appreciate the Department clarifying its major strategic aims, and its dedication to its mission of ensuring safe and efficient transportation systems that fit the needs of the American people. However, we are concerned that the draft plan fails to identify several factors that should be directly addressed in order to achieve the Department's strategic goals.

Several key elements missing from the draft strategic plan pertain to highway and vehicle safety. One of these directly involves driving automation, which we agree could significantly reduce crashes caused by driver error as it improves mobility for millions of Americans. At the same time, we are concerned that driving automation could also bring new risks to our roads. Consumers Union urges automakers and policymakers alike to take a smart, safe path to realizing the promise of automated vehicles. For this reason, we were concerned that the draft plan does not mention the new hazards that these cars may present, and the critical work that the Department likely will need to do to mitigate risks to consumers.

Additionally, there are a number of key issues that were discussed in the DOT Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2014-2018 that are missing from this version. While we understand that the strategic plan is a high-level document, and that it will not detail every activity undertaken by the Department, the following priorities are critical to consumers' well-being and we urge you to directly address them in this plan:

¹ Consumer Reports is an independent, nonprofit organization that works side by side with consumers to create a fairer, safer, and healthier world. As the world's largest independent product-testing organization, Consumer Reports uses its more than 50 labs, auto test center, and survey research center to rate thousands of products and services annually. Founded in 1936, Consumer Reports has over 7 million subscribers to its magazine, website, and other publications.

- Impaired, Distracted, and Drowsy Driving: 14,750 people died in crashes caused by drunk, distracted, and drowsy driving in 2016 alone.² While we are hopeful that the fully self-driving cars of tomorrow will help reduce these numbers, humans likely will remain the primary drivers of passenger vehicles for the foreseeable future. Accordingly, the Department should describe its specific efforts to address dangerous driving behaviors and reduce crashes attributable to them.
- Pedestrian, Cyclist, and Motorcyclist Deaths: The draft 2018-2022 strategic plan does not appropriately reflect the balance of vehicle-related hazards on our roads. It specifically addresses rural driving issues, but not pedestrian, motorcyclist, and cyclist deaths, which often, if not always, are associated with urban road safety challenges and accounted for 12,113 deaths in 2016. It is especially necessary to address these risks considering that the number of deaths in each of these three categories has been increasing since 2014, with more pedestrians and cyclists dying on our roads last year than in any year over the last quarter-century.³
- Vehicle-to-Vehicle (V2V) Communications: We are concerned about the possibility that work on the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration’s (NHTSA) plan to require new cars to come equipped with wireless V2V technology might be delayed or halted.⁴ Consumers Union has long supported the use of this technology to reduce crashes and deaths, as well as for its ability to enhance the effectiveness of driving automation systems, and urges DOT to complete its planned V2V final rule as quickly as possible.⁵
- Defects and Enforcement: The draft strategic plan fails to mention DOT’s essential role in evaluating, investigating, and identifying potential motor vehicle safety defects. This is all the more important after defects identified in recent years involving GM ignition switches and Takata airbags were responsible for at least 100 deaths and some 350 injuries nationwide.⁶ Nor does the plan mention the critical importance of using NHTSA’s enforcement authority to get cars off the road if a defect is putting people in danger.
- Advanced Driver-Assistance Systems: While highly and fully automated driving systems will hopefully bring tremendous safety benefits, there are proven, lifesaving technologies available today that should be standard across more vehicle makes and models. These include automatic emergency braking (AEB) and forward collision warning (FCW).⁷ The DOT

² NHTSA, “USDOT Releases 2016 Fatal Traffic Crash Data” (Oct. 6, 2017) (online at: www.nhtsa.gov/press-releases/usdot-releases-2016-fatal-traffic-crash-data).

³ NHTSA, “USDOT Releases 2016 Fatal Traffic Crash Data” (Oct. 6, 2017) (online at: www.nhtsa.gov/press-releases/usdot-releases-2016-fatal-traffic-crash-data).

⁴ See Associated Press, “Gov’t won’t pursue talking car mandate” (Nov. 1, 2017) (online at: apnews.com/9a605019eeba4ad2934741091105de42).

⁵ See Consumers Union, “CU comments to NHTSA on the proposed V2V communications safety standard” (Apr. 12, 2017) (online at: consumersunion.org/research/cu-comments-to-nhtsa-on-the-proposed-v2v-communications-safety-standard/).

⁶ Consumer Reports, “Takata Airbag Recall - Everything You Need to Know” (July 14, 2017) (online at: www.consumerreports.org/cro/news/2016/05/everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-takata-air-bag-recall/index.htm); Consumer Reports, “GM ignition death toll rises again, now at 90” (Apr. 18, 2015) (online at: www.consumerreports.org/cro/news/2015/04/gm-ignition-death-toll-rises-again-now-at-90/index.htm).

⁷ NHTSA, “Safety Technologies” (online at: www.nhtsa.gov/equipment/safety-technologies).

strategic plan should explicitly reference the Department’s plans to support the increased deployment of these and other technologies demonstrated to save lives on the road.

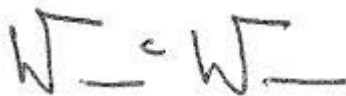
- Commercial Trucks: The safety of commercial trucks is important to consumers on the road, as demonstrated by the fact that more than 80% of the 4,317 people that died in crashes involving large trucks last year were pedestrians or occupants of other vehicles.⁸ The Department should indicate in its strategic plan its objectives for meaningfully reducing deaths and injuries in such crashes over the 2018-2022 period.

In addition to our concerns related to highway and vehicle safety, we also are concerned about DOT’s commitment to reduce fuel consumption and promote environmental sustainability. While the strategic plan for fiscal years 2014-2018 dedicated an entire section to the Department’s aims for promoting fuel efficiency and reductions in carbon emissions, this draft excludes any such discussion. At the least, we urge DOT to describe in far greater detail its plans to “improve the energy and environmental performance of the transportation sector.”⁹ It should address the Department’s goals and objectives related to the promotion of cleaner cars and improved fuel economy for U.S. consumers, including:

- Fuel Economy Standards for 2021-2025. NHTSA should commit to continuing progress on fuel economy standards to deliver consumer savings in the light-duty sector, especially for light-duty trucks, which are lagging behind. The Energy Policy and Conservation Act of 1975 requires that DOT consider the four statutory factors of “technological feasibility, economic practicability, the effect of other motor vehicle standards of the Government on fuel economy, and the need for the United States to conserve energy.”¹⁰ The data NHTSA and EPA have collected and the robust analysis already completed indicate that setting the standards at the “maximum feasible” level should be at least as stringent as the augural standards set in 2012.

Thank you for your consideration of our comments. Consumers Union stands ready to continue working with the Department to improve consumer safety and quality of life throughout the transportation sector.

Respectfully submitted,



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⁸ NHTSA, “USDOT Releases 2016 Fatal Traffic Crash Data” (Oct. 6, 2017) (online at: www.nhtsa.gov/press-releases/usdot-releases-2016-fatal-traffic-crash-data).

⁹ U.S. Department of Transportation, “Transportation for a New Generation, Strategic Plan, Fiscal Years 2014-2018” (online at: www.transportation.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/docs/2014-2018-strategic-plan_0.pdf).

¹⁰ 49 U.S.C. §§ 32902(a), 32902(f).