


From top to bottom: The Honda CR-V, the Kia Sportage, and the Isuzu Rodeo.

Three SUVs rolled on side in a crash test by agency

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WASHINGTON — The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said three sport-utility vehicles flipped over during crash tests, the first time the government has reported such result. The findings for the Honda CR-V, an Isuzu Rodeo and a Kia Sportage increase the chances that the agency may adopt tougher rules designed to prevent rollover crashes. The vehicles tipped over when struck in the side by a fast-moving barrier, according to an agency statement.

IN THE STATEMENT, the NHTSA said it didn't conclusively know whether the three vehicles are more prone to roll over in side-impact crashes than other sport utilities, adding that the tests weren't designed to measure a vehicle's tendency to roll over. Many experts consider certain sport-utility vehicles more likely to flip than other vehicles, because of their height and relative narrowness.

Spokesmen for Hunda Motor Co., Isuzu Motors Ltd. and Kia Motors Corp. said their vehicles had all performed well in protecting occupants in side-impact crashes, which is what the test is supposed to measure. "What the tests are designed to test, the CR-V passes with flying colors," the Honda spokesman said. A spokesman for Isuzu said the side-impact test "has no correlation to dynamic vehicle stability." The Kia spokesman said that when the auto maker performed the NHTSA test on the Sportage, it hadn't flipped over, and the company sees the rollover as "an anomaly."

A LONG-RUNNING ISSUE

The results highlight one of the longest-running, most intractable auto-safety issues. In 1997, the most recent year for which statistics are available, more than 9,400 people in the U.S. died when their cars, trucks or vans flipped over. Rollover fatalities more than doubled over the past decade among SUV occupants, to 1,482 in 1997, as the rugged vehicles have become top sellers.

Since the early 1970s, the agency has tested vehicles for rolling over and tried to develop rules that would eliminate production of vehicles likely to tip. But despite years of testing, there is still no rule that sets such a standard. The agency has worked to make rollover accidents more survivable by passing head-

protection guidelines and other improvements, and sought to warn drivers of the danger with a sticker that is currently being redesigned.

But last year, the NHTSA ran extensive new tests designed to determine which vehicles are prone to rollover accidents. The agency tested a dozen cars, trucks and SUVs, which were jerked around sharp angles by computerized steering machines. Agency officials have declined to reveal results, but the computers were expected to yield more-accurate findings than human drivers or older-generation machines. Most rollovers occur in single-vehicle crashes.

A DIFFERENT KIND OF TEST

In the recent study, the flips occurred in a very different type of test. In the side-impact trial, a moving barrier covered in collapsible aluminum honeycomb comes at the vehicle at an angle. Two of the tests, for the Honda and the Isuzu, were done as part of the NHTSA's consumer-information safety-rating program. The Sportage test was done at a lower speed, as part of federal safety-standards compliance testing.

The three rollovers, combined with the data from last year's ambitious series of tests, boost the likelihood that the NHTSA will move toward proposing a rollover standard in some form. The agency has declined to comment on its plans, but industry officials say NHTSA is likely to propose a consumer-rating system that would rank vehicles' stability and make the results public.

Such a move would likely draw opposition from many auto makers, which fear a blow to the sales of SUVs, which are popular with safety-conscious families. Other sport-utility vehicles, including the Suzuki Samurai and the Jeep CJ, have been reported to roll over during road-testing by safety advocates and journalists, but government results likely would carry far more weight with buyers.

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