

Sticky Subject

Industry Finds Devil In the Details of Plan For Bolder SUV Labels

New Warnings Highlighting Risk of Rollovers Inspire Exercise in Deconstruction

The Fate of the Dangling Man

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WASHINGTON.—For 25 years, auto makers and federal safety regulators have wrangled over how to solve the deadly problem of vehicle rollovers, but—for now, at least—it all comes down to a choice of words, pictures and colors.

Both sides have deployed armies of engineers, consultants and lawyers to study the problem. They have flipped cars and trucks in tests and amassed mountains of data on what models may be more likely to roll over on sharp turns. But they have yet to devise a remedy, even as auto makers sell sport-utility vehicles nationwide in record numbers—2.8 million in 1998 alone, according to Ward's Automotive Report. That's of particular concern because many experts believe certain SUVs, because of their height and relative narrowness, are more prone to rollovers than other vehicles.

Now, federal regulators are preparing to unveil as early as this week their most pointed message yet about the danger. But not before they have answered this pivotal question: Are motorists more inclined to heed a yellow warning than a red one?

Deceptively Complex

Such are the issues that have framed the debate in recent months. On the surface, the government's task looks like a simple one: It involves no more than replacing the densely worded, 15-year-old warning the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration requires on many SUV models with a terse and more eye-catching rendition.

The new label would place blame for rollovers on no one and cost auto makers next to nothing. Yet the agency's effort to raise the profile of an unobtrusive label has become a minor flash point in the rollover debate. And it shows how the complexities—and, sometimes, the inanities—of auto safety can defy regulatory solutions.

These same complexities were what led the NHTSA to resort to warning labels in the first place, in 1984, after a decade of failed attempts to arrive at a benchmark for identifying those vehicles that were most likely to roll. The agency required the warnings on SUVs with a distance of 110 inches or less between front and rear axles, in the hope it could reduce the number of rollovers by changing drivers' behavior.

That approach proved palatable to the auto industry, which contends rollovers



have more to do with careless drivers and difficult driving conditions than faulty vehicles. "Vehicles just don't flop over in a parking lot," says George F. Ball, managing counsel for American Suzuki Motor Corp. "You need an initiator."

The current labels, usually affixed to the vehicle's sun visor, caution drivers of such models as the Jeep Grand Cherokee and the Toyota RAV4 that their "multipurpose passenger vehicle will handle and maneuver differently from an ordinary passenger car." The required 77-word block of text goes on to warn that the vehicle "may rollover or may go out of control and crash" if the driver makes sharp turns or abrupt maneuvers. It refers the driver to his owner's manual for guidance and ends with an admonishment to "Wear Your Seat Belts At All Times."

But two years ago, the NHTSA concluded that many drivers were ignoring its low-key warning. And it embarked on an effort to design a new label, with fewer words, bright colors, bigger lettering and accompanying graphics.

Last April, the agency proposed three label options, all of which warn specifically that the affected vehicle poses a "high or "higher" rollover risk. One, topped by a black-and-orange "WARNING," shows a Seat belt being buckled and an SUV tilting as it rounds a curve: "High Risk of Rollover," it adds, "Always Wear Your Seat Belt" and "Avoid Sudden Stops And Sharp Turns." A second version has "WARNING: HIGH RISK OF ROLLOVER" splashed across the top in yellow and black, with bigger illustrations of the seat belt and the listing vehicle but the same advice about stops, sharp turns and seat belts.

The third option puts "WARNING" in red and white. On opposite sides, the label depicts a seat belt and an occupant hanging precariously from the window of a tipping SUV; the label warns in smaller lettering of "Higher Rollover Risk" and counsels "Always Buckle Up."

Not surprisingly, the dangling passenger graphic wasn't a hit with auto makers, who deluged the NHTSA with comments on the three options. Isuzu Motors Ltd.'s reaction was typical of most: Isuzu "feels the depiction of an occupant being ejected from the window should be deleted. Ejection from a vehicle is primarily caused by nonuse or improper use of Seat belts."

The industry, fearful of litigation, also submitted piles of pages parsing the definitions of each word proposed for the new labels, objecting strongly to the phrase "high