



The Center for Auto Safety

Feds to Tighten Window Rules

Safety agency will require safer switches after growing number of deadly accidents

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By Jeff Plungis / Detroit News Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON - Federal auto safety regulators will unveil new rules Monday calling for safer power window designs.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is expected to require switches that are less likely to accidentally activate power windows, which have been linked to a spate of recent injuries and deaths among small children.

In the latest incident, Kids and Cars, a watchdog group, said a 2-1/2-year-old boy died in Amite, La., last week in a Ford F-350 pickup after accidentally stepping on a power window switch. It is the eighth child fatality linked to power windows the group has documented this year.

NHTSA administrator Dr. Jeffrey Runge will announce the new rules in Columbus, Ohio, alongside Sen. Mike DeWine, R-Ohio, who sponsored legislation this year to require new switch designs. The law would mandate rules by 2006 and require "window switches and related technologies be designed to prevent the accidental closing by children of power windows."

The legislation is part of a highway bill Congress is expected to finalize this fall.

Some safety advocates are concerned that NHTSA will limit the new measures to safer window switches, instead of forcing automakers to implement more aggressive measures, such as windows that retract when a sensor detects an object in its path.

"On one hand, we're elated that the agency is taking up the issue," said Janette Fennell, president of Kids and Cars. "But they have an opportunity to ensure a child never dies this way

again. Auto-reverse would eliminate the cause of all of these deaths and all of these injuries."

NHTSA has examined those kinds of technologies in recent months. on July 20, the agency met with representatives from Nartron Corp., a Reed City, Mich., company that has devised a "smart power window" that retracts as soon as it detects an object.

John Washeleski, Nartron's senior vice president of engineering, said agency officials indicated they were focused on safer switch designs as a good first step. But Washeleski said any measure that stopped short of requiring the extra protection of an automatic retractor would fall short.

"There's no such thing as a safe switch," Washeleski said. "Talk to five people, and you'll find someone who was injured or was nearly injured by a power window."

Many automakers have voluntarily phased out the "toggle" switch design considered to be more dangerous. A toggle or "rocker" switch raises a window if pressed forward. Safety advocates say that children can inadvertently raise windows by stepping on the switches. European and Japanese automakers have opted increasingly for "lever" switches that must be pulled upward by a finger to make the window rise. Some foreign brands are also offering windows that bounce back when an object gets in their path.

Safety advocates say U.S. automakers have been slow to adopt the newer switch designs. But some models do have lever switches, including the Chrysler Pacifica, the Pontiac Montana and the Chevrolet Silverado.

NHTSA has studied power window design since 1996 in response to a petition from Prospects Corp., an automotive supplier. The company wanted NHTSA to change its regulations to allow for infrared detection systems that detect objects in the path of a closing window.

In response to the latest deaths among children, automakers have advised parents not to leave children alone in cars and trucks.

Carolyn Brown, a spokeswoman for Ford Motor Co., said the company would not comment until the agency unveils its proposal Monday.

Invented by Daimler-Benz in 1948, electric power windows were first installed mainly on luxury models. But as they became more popular in the 1960s, a new safety hazard developed. In 1962, Detroit Mayor Jerome Cavanaugh's 2-year-old son, Christopher, nearly was strangled by a power window in the tailgate of the family's new station wagon. Consumer safety advocate Ralph Nader referred to power windows as "guillotines" in the 1960s.