



Motorcycle Riders Foundation

236 Massachusetts Ave. N.E. #510, Washington, D.C. 20002

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Statement of

Senator Robert Letourneau

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Chairman of the NH Senate Transportation Committee

Lifelong Motorcyclist

Representing the Motorcycle Riders Foundation

Before the

Transportation and Infrastructure Committee

US House of Representatives

Subcommittee on Highways and Transit

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Regarding

Highway Safety Programs





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Chairman Defazio, Mr. Duncan, and members of the Highways and Transit Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to testify today on behalf of American motorcyclists'. My name is Senator Robert Letourneau and I am here representing the Motorcycle Riders Foundation (MRF) which is a coalition of state's motorcyclists' rights organizations and individual members representing about 275,000 motorcyclists. I also serve as chairman of the New Hampshire Senate Transportation Committee. I also serve as a member of the state Motorcycle Rider Education Advisory Board and the Governor's Motorcycle Safety Task Force of the New Hampshire Highway Safety Agency. Additionally, I have been motorcycle rider for 41 years.

2010 funds

I appreciate the opportunity to provide your subcommittee with some thoughts the MRF has on highway safety programs administered by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). The members of the MRF are appreciative that in the SAFETEA-LU legislation section 2010 provided \$25 million specifically for motorcycle safety rider education and motorist awareness of motorcycles. We are in the middle of the second year of disbursements to the 47 states that applied and have seen the money going to extremely worthwhile programs. Funding shortfalls for motorcycle safety are present across the country. Only twenty four (24) states report that safety programs operate from user fees alone. Eighteen (18) states use a combination of user fees, dedicated state funding and federal funds. Three (3) states use only federal funds. Making matters even worse, during this time of budget shortfalls many Governors are raiding the dedicated safety funds generated by licensing fees from motorcycles to pay for non-transportation programs. When states are running a deficit, they often turn to motorcycle safety funds as a piggy bank. We hope that next reauthorization not only keep the federal motorcycle safety grant program as a priority but also expands this program exponentially. Many non profit state motorcycle rights organizations (SMRO's) have implemented share the road campaigns and impaired riding reduction programs with private funding sources. These 2010 funds can be made available to the non profit world to help them continue these important endeavors. We ask that Congress continue this practice set for the in SAFETEA-LU. Consider this, under current SAFETEA-LU law the federal government spends \$1 dollar per motorcyclist per year and ask your self if you think that is enough.

My personal experience as a member of the Motorcycle Safety Task Force of the Governors Highway Safety Agency whose responsibility is the use of these funds is very positive. We have been able to purchase new training bikes adding to our fleet opening new possibilities for riders to train. We were able to purchase new helmets for the program most of which are 18 years old. Additionally we were able to provide the MSF "*Intersections*" video to all of our driver training schools providing valuable education to our new drivers about the issues motorcyclists face on the road daily. This is possible because of the 2010 grants. Your tax dollars truly at work.





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Accident Prevention

Past legislation this committee has crafted included language that specifically directs NHTSA to focus on accident prevention over occupant protection when addressing motorcycle safety. Occupant protection has been successful with other forms of vehicle design, however the frame geometry and inherent exposure of a motorcycle limits any occupant protection success. Accident prevention saves societal costs, reduces injuries and reduces property damage. We ask that you continue to promote outcome oriented accident prevention solutions.

Again, from a personal perspective, on July 5 2008 putting my money where my mouth is I took and passed the advanced "*Skilled Rider Course*" because I know it saves lives, and, yes, I did learn that I have rider's skills I was not using properly. However, more importantly when people ask me if I have taken the course I can say yes and it works...

HOV Lanes

Another provision of past authorization bills passed by this committee creating a safer riding environment was the access for motorcycles to HOV lanes. This action by Congress has resulted in all federally funded HOV lanes are open to motorcycles. When commuting, motorcyclists are safer in a riding environment that has fewer vehicles and traffic is flowing smoothly rather than in congested stop and go traffic. When considering future highway design it is important to include motorcycles and we ask that this same allowance be assured with HOT lanes and PPP's. HOV lane access provides motorcyclists with a safer commuting environment. For that, 6 million American motorcyclists thank Congress.

Motorcyclist Advisory Council

Also included in SAFETEA-LU was language that created an advisory council to provide wisdom to the Secretary of Transportation on motorcycles and the design of highway infrastructure. I am pleased to tell you the initial two-year charter passed by congress has been so successful that the Secretary recently decided to extend the council for another two years.

Another personal note, in light of increased motorcycle fatal accidents during the 2005-riding season; Rep. Packard and I requested the Governors Highway Safety Agency to form a task force to come up with solutions to this increasing problem. You will see that in light of augmented motorcycle registrations, we were able to find ways to decrease the fatality problem through awareness programs, improved rider education programs and new legislation.





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Incentive funds

The MRF understands the need to incentivize certain actions from the states in order to make the roads as safe as possible. We support incentive programs as long as the funds do not come from much need monies to maintain and improve our roads. We support incentive grants that are performance based on reducing accidents and fatalities. Those two items should be the only criteria. The MRF opposes incentive grants that are issued based on states passing specific laws.

Green vehicles

We ask Congress to promote motorcycling as a means of reducing energy consumption and reducing traffic congestion. One way to achieve a safer highway landscape is to follow some international practices that our world neighbors are implementing such as more motorcycle parking and lane sharing. Allowing motorcycles to trickle through red light traffic to get out of the traffic mix has been extremely successful over seas in reducing crashes as well as congestion.

International Efforts

Last month the MRF participated in a meeting held by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and its 30 member Countries in conjunction with International Transport Forum and the Joint Transportation Research Centre in Lillehammer, Norway to develop a list of the top twenty motorcycle safety priorities. Priorities one, three and five all stress proper rider training. Priorities six and seven emphasize awareness campaigns. Two areas the American motorcycle rights community has been promoting for decades.

Rising fatalities

Others on this panel will tell you that motorcyclists make up 3 percent of the vehicles on the road and 10 percent of the fatalities and they would be correct. That sounds like a major problem. However, what they do not tell you paints a very different scenario.

According to June 2008, survey of the State motorcycle safety programs by the Governors Highway Safety Association motorcycle registrations have more than doubled since 1997 and new motorcycle sales have quadrupled since then. Surely when the population is increased, one must expect the crash numbers to climb as well. Simple statistics.

That same report stated this explosion of motorcycle sales from 356,000 in 1997 to 1.1 million today is crippling the rider education programs across the country. Twenty nine (29) States and DC have capacity problems and often have wait times for training more than 12 weeks. This is another reason why Congress needs to invest more money in motorcycle rider education via the section 2010 grant program





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The last time motorcycle deaths were at the rate they are now was 1986 when motorcycle registrations were just under 5 million. In 2006, almost 6.5 million motorcycles were registered in this country. That is another 1.5 million motorcycles and the same number of fatalities. Maybe the motorcycle fatality rate is not as out of control as some would like you to believe.

A Pennsylvania joint House and Senate committee on legislative budget and finance issued a report on June 25th, 2008 on the fatality trends since PA's modernization of its helmet law in 2003 to allow for riders 21 years or older who have completed a motorcycle safety course or have held a valid motorcycle license for 2 calendar years. The report found that "Due to the substantial increase in motorcycle registration, the rate of crashes per 10,000 motorcycle registrations actually declined from 132.4 in CY (Calendar Year) 2000 to 113.2 crashes per 10,000 motorcycle registrations in CY 2007". The report also showed that helmeted riders involved in a collision dropped from 67% in 2000 to 57% in 2007.

When motorcycle safety is addressed, it almost always revolves around one controversial issue. Helmet laws. All but three States have one version or another of a helmet law on the books. Twenty seven (27) states allow riders to exercise choice when donning personal protective equipment and the remaining 20 require all riders to wear a helmet of some sort. If helmet laws worked there would be a sharp contrast concerning crash data between States that require universal helmet use and those that do not. I am here to tell you that is not the case.

According to a National Highway Traffic Safety Administration August 2007 publication two of the three states that had the largest increase in fatalities from 05-06 have universal helmet laws (AL and CA) and of the three states with single largest decrease in motorcycle fatalities over the year before two states (IL and NH) have no helmet requirement whatsoever and the third (OH) allows for experienced riders to ride without a helmet.

The bottom line is helmet laws do not prevent accidents and as a daily rider, that is the best-case scenario: avoid the crash in the first place. How can we do this? Through proper, affordable rider education offered locally and secondly through widespread motorist awareness campaigns to educate the general motoring public to be aware of motorcycles on the road.

One last personal observation, in New Hampshire during the first 10 years of our motorcycle education program having trained over 23,000 riders only one of those riders was involved in a fatality and we believe that that rider had a medical event. Education is the key to successfully reducing motorcycle fatalities our experience is proof positive.

On behalf of the MRF and Americas motorcyclists', I thank you for this opportunity to present our concerns and views as you consider safety issues in the development of the national transportation system.

