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Regulators overhaul a program for rating vehicle safety

The tougher standards are planned to start with the 2010 models.

From Bloomberg News

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U.S. regulators are overhauling a program for rating vehicle safety, including new crash tests that make it tougher for automakers to earn the highest grades.

The changes starting with 2010 models include more challenging front- and side-crash measures that will be incorporated with rollover-test results into a single rating, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said Tuesday.

The announcement tries to answer calls from safety and government watchdogs who have sought to revamp the 30-year-old program, saying it has become too easy for automakers to get five-star scores.

"The ratings encourage vehicle manufacturers to continue to design vehicles that reach an even higher level of safety," NHTSA administrator Nicole Nason said of the new measures.

The tests for the first time will include smaller dummies that represent petite women and older children, the agency said. A new frontal test and a side-impact crash that simulates a car wrapping around a tree will be factored into the ratings. Tests for leg injuries will also be done.

"We want to make sure consumers can easily take safety into consideration," Transportation Secretary Mary E. Peters said.

A 2005 government report said crash tests no longer gave automakers enough incentive to improve because most cars and trucks received the top two ratings of four or five stars.

The U.S. should change the tests to account for a rising percentage of sport utility vehicles and other light trucks on roads, including the effects of crashes between large and small vehicles, according to the study, conducted by the Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress.

The U.S. said 98% of 2007 models achieved four- or five-star ratings for driver-side frontal crashes. The figure was below 30% for 1979 models.

Vehicle-safety programs in Europe, Japan and Australia have become more comprehensive than those in the U.S., which doesn't do enough to assess the safety of occupants in crashes, Joan Claybrook, president of the consumer group Public Citizen, told the highway safety agency in 2007 testimony.

NHTSA said it would also add a rating that indicates whether vehicles carry technologies such as electronic-stability control and lane-departure warning systems.

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