

July 17, 2008

US House Holds Highway Safety Hearing

The Motorcycle Riders Foundation reports that the US House of Representatives Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, Subcommittee on Highways and Transit held a hearing Wednesday July 16th regarding the status of all of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA) highway safety programs including motorcycle safety and the importance of federal funding in supporting safety education across the country. The hearing also focused on van and tire safety, impaired driving, and strategic safety plans amongst others. Testifying on behalf of the MRF was Senator Robert Letourneau. Others who testified included NHTSA official Jim Ports, Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA), AAA, and MADD.

New Hampshire State Senator Letourneau is chairman of the New Hampshire Senate Transportation Committee, a member of the state Motorcycle Rider Education Advisory Board, the Governor's Motorcycle Safety Task Force of the New Hampshire Highway Safety Agency, as well as an MRF Charter Member.

Letourneau thanked Congress for appropriating approximately \$25 million from SAFETEA-LU, the most recent transportation appropriations law, for motorcycle safety education efforts across the country, and encouraged Congress to continue to fund motorcycle safety and driver awareness programs around the country. He said the explosion of motorcycle sales from 356,000 in 1997 to 1.1 million today is crippling many rider education programs across the country, and that Congress needs to invest more money in motorcycle rider education.

Letourneau said other directives established in SAFETEA-LU, including encouraging motorcycle transportation as a means to conserve energy, opening High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes to motorcycles and establishing a Motorcycle Advisory Council to work with the U.S. Secretary of Transportation, have been beneficial to both motorcycle riders and the nation.

"In New Hampshire, during the first 10 years of our motorcycle education program, over 23,000 riders have completed the education course and only one of those riders was involved in a fatality," said Letourneau.

"Clearly, education is the key to successfully reducing motorcycle fatalities, and New Hampshire's experience is proof positive."

During the hearing while questioning NHTSA, GHSA and Government Accountability Office (GAO) Ranking Member Duncan (R-TN) mentioned that if

motorcycle fatalities are growing then we (congress) should consider enlarging the 2010 funds exponentially.

There was plenty of talk about helmets and helmet laws. All of the government panelists advocated for helmet law. The acting chairwoman at that point of the hearing Grace Napolitano (D-CA) seemed to nod along in agreement with the helmet advocates. So it's a good thing the actual Chairman is Peter DeFazio (D-OR) who staunchly opposes mandatory helmet laws.

"There was talk of helmet laws from the usual suspects and we expected that, I feel the motorcyclists were well represented with the MRF, AMA, MIC and ABATE of MD in the room today" said Motorcycle Riders Foundation Vice President of Government Relations Jeff Hennie. "There was also as much talk, if not more, about funding proper rider education so that's the direction we want to keep going in" he added.

In Other Committee News

The Energy and Commerce Committee approved a bill that states that insurers must provide coverage to students who downgrade to part-time status as a result of a serious illness or injury. It would continue coverage for up to 12 months.

Although the bill is non controversial, the markup hit a hiccup after Texas Republican Michael C. Burgess offered a bill of his (HR 1076) as an amendment to bar insurers from denying coverage for injuries sustained from legal recreational activities. Burgess said that current law allows plans to deny benefits if an injury results for some high-risk activities such as use of a motorcycle or snowboarding.

While Chairman John D. Dingell, (D-MI), said he believed the law should be changed to prohibit those denials, he ruled the amendment was not germane to the underlying bill. Some Members including ranking member Joe L. Barton (R-TX), countered that the amendment would change the same section of law as the college student bill, but after some debate, agreed to abide by the chair's ruling. John Shimkus(R-IL) and John Shadegg (R-AZ) voted present on the measure's final passage as a procedural protest to the germaneness ruling.

The amendment may have failed but a favorable view from the Chairman could be promising down the road.