

**Chairman Susan M. Collins Opening Statement
Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation,
Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies**

**Hearing titled “The Automated and Self-Driving Vehicle Revolution:
What is the Role of Government?”**

November 16, 2016

(As prepared for delivery)

I am pleased to be joined today by our Ranking Member, Senator Jack Reed, as we hold this hearing to examine the role of government in enhancing roadway safety through the careful deployment of automated and self-driving vehicles, which could revolutionize our transportation system.

I also welcome our panel of witnesses. We are joined today by Mark Rosekind, Administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; Deborah Hersman, President and C.E.O. of the National Safety Council; Paul Brubaker, President and C.E.O. of the Alliance for Transportation Innovation; and Dr. Nidhi Kalra, Senior Information Scientist at the RAND Corporation. I look forward to hearing from each of you.

The potential of this new technology is exciting. Cars that drive themselves and avoid accidents. Seniors and disabled individuals able to retain or gain their ability to get around town. At first, it sounds like science fiction or an advance far off in the future. But this technology is being tested and perfected right now, and it could save thousands of lives.

According to the most recent statistics from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, more than 35,000 lives were lost in crashes on U.S. roadways in 2015, and preliminary estimates indicate a 10 percent increase in the first half of 2016. It is important to highlight that 94 percent of roadway crashes are the result of human factors, or simply put, driver error, such as distracted driving – sometimes caused by hands-free technology, impaired driving, and speeding. These crashes are preventable, and we should do everything we can to eliminate them.

The testing and safe deployment of automated vehicle technologies have the potential to reduce substantially the number of driver-related crashes and fatalities. Let me emphasize that point: if the technology were perfected, automated vehicles could eliminate many of the crashes on our nation’s roadways and save thousands of lives every year.

While fully self-driving autonomous vehicles are still years away from being available to the general public, many new vehicles already have driver-assist features such as automatic emergency breaking, rearview cameras, and lane-keep assist systems. These technologies are already saving lives and reducing injuries on our roadways.

In addition to improving safety, self-driving vehicles can provide mobility options to our seniors and disabled populations, particularly those living in rural communities like my state of Maine, where many of our older drivers currently do not have an easy way to get to the doctor or to the grocery store. Public transportation is nonexistent in much of Maine, and taxi service is very limited in rural areas. Seniors who can no longer drive often have very few options.

A self-driving car, or even one with limited automated features, could help seniors feel more comfortable driving at night and could help those who currently must rely on others to get around to maintain their independence. A recent survey of drivers over the age of 50 showed that almost 80 percent of those who plan to buy a car within the next two years will be seeking automated features such as blind spot warning, crash mitigation, and lane departure warning systems. Yet many consumers remain wary of purchasing a fully autonomous vehicle anytime soon. I know Dr. Kalra will provide us with more insight on the potential benefits of automated technologies for our seniors.

To help accelerate the safe testing and deployment of autonomous vehicles, the Department of Transportation released its “Federal Automated Vehicles Policy” on September 20th, which includes vehicle performance guidance, model state policy, an assessment of current regulatory tools, and a discussion of future regulatory tools for Congressional consideration.

While this was an important first step, it is clear that D.O.T.’s guidance document needs further refinement to help ensure that automakers are able to bring the safety and mobility benefits of autonomous vehicles into the marketplace without unnecessary government regulations. I am particularly interested in hearing from all of our witnesses today on what improvements can be made to these guidelines.

Automobile manufacturers face a number of roadblocks integrating autonomous vehicles onto our nation’s roadways. Some have called on the Administration to put the brakes on autonomous vehicle deployment by imposing onerous requirements through a rulemaking process, which could take several years to finalize, stifling innovation in the meantime.

We must recognize that automated vehicle technology is advancing faster than government agencies can act, and in this instance, impeding the advancement of technology may prevent us from saving lives. The Department’s guidance provides a more effective voluntary 15-point “safety assessment” that incentivizes automakers to certify they have addressed all relevant issues ranging from cybersecurity, to human-machine interface, to ethical considerations.

Another challenge facing autonomous vehicles is the vast number of state and local governments that are seeking to regulate this technology. Unlike vehicle safety, which is governed by federal law, the safety and licensing of drivers are under the jurisdiction of state governments. While the Department’s guidance deters states from interfering with federal vehicle safety standards, one topic we will explore is whether or not D.O.T.’s approach also has the effect of encouraging state and local governments to set prohibitive requirements related to testing, licensing, and registration for automated vehicle testing.

Given the public's keen interest in automated and self-driving vehicles, it is important for state and local governments to take a balanced approach in allowing the research, development, safe testing, and deployment of automated vehicles. However, one serious accident, such as occurred in Florida, can cause mistrust of this new technology, and that could lead to greater local restrictions on testing and deployment. It is particularly important that D.O.T. work with automotive manufacturers, suppliers, and technology companies, as well as the commercial end users of automated vehicles, to ensure they are operating with an abundance of caution to avoid excessive government intervention.

With that, let me call upon my colleague and friend Senator Reed, the ranking member, for his opening statement.

###