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Statement of Rep. Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Member, Committee on Energy and Commerce
Hearing on “Takata Airbag Ruptures and Recalls”
Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing, and Trade
December 3, 2014

Mr. Chairman, here is what we know so far about the Takata airbag recalls: we know that there has been a series of airbag recalls affecting millions of vehicles dating back to 2008, and we know that at least five people are dead and dozens have been injured by these defective airbags.

There are questions about the Takata airbags that remain unanswered. We do not know exactly what Takata and auto manufacturers knew about these defective airbags and when they knew it.

We do not know – and it appears that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Takata, and the auto manufacturers do not know either – the root cause of all of these exploding airbags, so we have questions about whether the replacement airbag inflators are safe.

New documents provided to the Committee reveal new questions. NHTSA recently requested a national recall of all defective airbags on the driver side of the car, but has limited its actions to regional recalls of passenger side airbags. But data we have received is raising new questions about the safety of passenger side airbags and the scope of recalls.

Takata has tested over 2,500 driver and passenger side airbags for ruptures. None of the driver side airbags ruptured in these tests. But Takata has observed over 60 passenger side airbag ruptures. Given these testing results, we need to understand why NHTSA has requested a broader recall for driver’s side airbags but has not made the same request for passenger side airbags.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to put the documents showing these test results into the hearing record.

We need to find answers to these questions, and I hope the Committee will continue its investigation even after we are gone. But we know enough now to begin our legislative work.

Mr. Chairman, last April I joined with Rep. Schakowsky to introduce H.R. 4364, the Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 2014. There are many important provisions in this legislation that would address problems that the Committee found in our investigations of Takata's exploding airbags and the GM ignition switch failure.

In both cases, auto manufacturers and auto parts manufacturers failed to provide key information to the federal agency in a timely fashion. And we learned last week of another major auto safety failure: for over a decade, Honda failed to report to NHTSA more than 1,700 claims of injuries or deaths caused by accidents in its vehicles.

Our legislation improves the Early Warning Reporting system by making more reported information public and ensuring that NHTSA receives significantly more information from manufacturers on any fatal incident involving a safety defect.

Additional data and greater transparency will help NHTSA identify deadly safety defects sooner.

In both the GM and Takata cases, NHTSA has been criticized for failing to recognize and act quickly enough as evidence mounted of deadly auto defects. Our bill provides more resources for NHTSA and gives NHTSA additional enforcement authorities, increasing fines for manufacturers that violate vehicle safety laws.

Mr. Chairman, today we may learn of other needed fixes to the current system, but our legislation is a good place to start.