



Office of the Chairman

**National Transportation Safety Board**

Washington, D.C. 20594

EXHIBIT e  
DATE 3/11/05  
SB 43**MAR 10 2005**

Honorable Mike Cooney  
Senator  
Montana Senate  
Post Office Box 200500  
Helena, Montana 59620-0500

Dear Senator Cooney:

I understand that on March 11, the Montana House Judiciary Committee will hear Senate Bill 43, which authorizes primary enforcement of Montana's seat belt law. On behalf of the National Transportation Safety Board, I thank you for your sponsorship of this important measure that will reduce the death toll on Montana's roads. States that have enacted primary enforcement legislation have consistently experienced an increase in their seat belt use rate and a corresponding decrease in the number of people injured or killed in motor vehicle crashes.

Montana is one of 18 States that applies its seat belt law to all vehicle seating positions, and I applaud the Montana Legislature for recognizing the virtue of requiring everyone in a vehicle to use his or her seat belt. The State's observed seat belt use rate in 2004 of 81 percent is commendable; however, from 1994 through 2003, more than 70 percent of the 2,100 occupants who died on Montana's highways were unrestrained. Seat belt use could have made the difference for many of those 2,100 people and their families.

Opponents to primary enforcement seat belt laws claim that nonuse is a personal choice and affects only the individual. That is simply not the case. Unbelted vehicle occupants frequently injure other occupants and unbelted drivers are less likely than belted drivers to be able to control their vehicles. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* has noted that a person's risk of death in a crash is associated with the restraint use of other occupants; in the study, the risk was lowest when all occupants were restrained.

Motor vehicle injuries and fatalities have a significant financial cost to society as well. Each critically injured survivor of a motor vehicle crash costs society an average of \$1.1 million, and the average inpatient cost for unbelted crash victims is 55 percent higher than for belted crash victims. The lifetime cost to society for each fatality is more than \$977,000. Those not directly involved in crashes pay for nearly three-quarters of all crash costs.

In 2003, 167 unrestrained occupants over the age of 7 died in motor vehicle crashes in Montana. When used properly, seat belts reduce the risk of fatal injury to front seat passenger vehicle occupants by 45 percent and to back seat occupants by 44 percent. Had those

167 individuals been using a seat belt, it is likely that at least 75 of them would have survived, saving Montana citizens more than \$73 million that year alone.

Montana has already experienced more highway deaths than at this time last year, and two separate crashes on March 6, in which two unbelted women were ejected and killed, exemplify the type of tragedy that your bill is designed to prevent. I am pleased that the Montana Senate soundly approved Senate Bill 43, and I hope that the Montana House will show the same level of leadership so that the roadways will be made safer for those traveling in your State.

Sincerely,



Ellen Engleman Connors  
Chairman

cc: Mr. Jim Lynch, Director  
Montana Department of Transportation

Ms. Denice Harris, Assistant Manager Public Relations  
AAA MountainWest