

DOT wants seat belts installed on new motorcoaches

By JOAN LOWY (AP) – Aug 16, 2010

WASHINGTON — New motorcoaches would for the first time be required to have lap-shoulder seat belts under a proposal announced Monday by Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood.

The plan affects large, tour-style buses, not smaller vehicles such as city buses or school buses. The motorcoach industry, which transports 750 million passengers a year, has 90 days to respond to the proposal. It would take effect three years after it's made final.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration indicated in the proposal that it is also considering requiring existing buses be retrofitted with belts, which is more expensive than incorporating belts into new buses. The proposal solicits comments on how that might best be done and whether lap-shoulder or lap-only belts should be required. An average of 19 people a year are killed in motorcoach accidents in the U.S. But a lack of seat belts has been cited by safety investigators in several deadly crashes.

In a January 2008 accident near Mexican Hat, Utah, nine passengers were killed and 43 injured when their motorcoach took a turn too fast at night as they returned from a ski trip. The bus tumbled down an embankment, its roof was sheared off and everyone aboard ejected except for the driver, who was wearing the only seat belt on the bus, and one man who was pinned between two seats.

Five members of Ohio's Bluffton University baseball team were killed along with their driver and his wife when their bus hurtled over an Atlanta highway overpass onto an interstate below in March 2007. Twenty-eight people were injured. Wearing lap-shoulder belts on motorcoaches could reduce the risk for passengers of being killed in a rollover crash by 77 percent, according to NHTSA.

"Seat belts save lives, and putting them in motorcoaches just makes sense," LaHood said in a statement.

The motorcoach industry supports the concept of requiring seatbelts on coaches so long as the regulations are based on "sound science," said American Bus Association President Pete Pantuso. He said he was reviewing the proposed rules.

The proposal is one of a series of initiatives from the Transportation Department in recent months to improve motorcoach safety. The department has also announced steps to address driver fatigue or inattention and improve operator maintenance. Research on improving motorcoach structure, fire safety protection and exiting in an emergency is also under way and may lead to new federal standards in the future, the department said.