

Texas Bus Crash Signals Need for Tougher Regulation, NTSB Says

By Angela Greiling Keane

Oct. 27 (Bloomberg) -- A U.S. regulator called for tire- pressure monitoring systems on commercial buses as part of stricter rules needed after a fatal crash in Texas last year caused by an under-inflated tire.

An automated system and daily checks with pressure gauges should be federal requirements because properly and improperly inflated tires can look the same under visual inspections, National Transportation Safety Board staff members said today at a hearing in Washington.

The NTSB is holding the hearing to examine the causes of a Sherman, Texas, crash that killed 17 people in August 2008, and to take a broader look at motor-coach operations. Some safety advocates and lawmakers are calling for measures including seatbelts, stronger roofs and more inspections.

“What we’re asking for is safety standards that are already present in autos and airplanes,” Yen-Chi Le, whose mother died in the crash, said in an interview today. “It’s not rocket science.”

The Texas crash also injured 38 passengers and the driver as the passengers were traveling to Carthage, Missouri, for an annual church trip.

In 2008, about 300 people died in bus crashes in the U.S., data from the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration show. There have been at least 37 motor-coach crashes and fires this year in the U.S., according to Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, a group that supports adding bus-operator and vehicle safety requirements.

Le, whose mother was a 62-year-old retired social worker, said she wants Congress to pass a measure sponsored by Senators Sherrod Brown, an Ohio Democrat, and Republican Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas that would require more-frequent safety inspections of commercial-bus operators. The measure would also mandate stronger roofs and glazing on windows to prevent passenger ejections.

American Bus Association Chief Executive Officer Peter Pantuso, called the Brown bill’s schedule “political and arbitrary,” and said his group supports a measure sponsored by Representative Bill Shuster, a Pennsylvania Republican.

“Regardless of the safety enhancements that are mandated in the future, the first priority is accident avoidance and getting illegal operators off the road as they cause most of the on-board fatalities,” Pantuso said today in an e-mail.

The Government Accountability Office, in a July report about motor-coach operators, found the operator of the bus in the Sherman crash was “reincarnated” under a different name after being ordered to stop operating because of safety violations.

It could cost small operators \$40,000 for each vehicle to equip buses with seatbelts, Pantuso said.