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Seat belts proposed for buses

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Two years after an early-morning bus crash in Sherman left 17 passengers dead along U.S. Highway 75, the Obama administration moved Monday to require that commercial buses be equipped with seat belts.

The proposed rule, which is subject to public comment and revision, could become final as soon as this winter and would take effect three years after that.

"Seat belts save lives, and putting them in motorcoaches just makes sense," Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said in announcing the proposal.

A federal requirement that commercial buses have seat belts would mark a milestone in what has been a decades-long fight by safety advocates and crash survivors to make highway bus crashes less deadly.

The government said Monday that 186 people died in the 54 motorcoach crashes recorded between 1999 and 2008.

Two of the worst happened in Texas, including a fiery 2005 crash that left 23 Hurricane Rita evacuees dead in Wilmer. The Sherman crash joined two other large crashes to make 2008 the deadliest year among those studied since 1999, the government said Monday. Forty-one died in crashes that year.

That study of crashes since 1999 shows almost two-thirds of the accidents happened when a single bus ran off the road or rolled over. And nearly 75 percent of the deaths attributed to rollovers occurred when passengers were ejected from the coaches, the government said.

Deadly Sherman crash

Federal investigators concluded that the lack of seat belts was one reason the Sherman accident was so deadly. The National Transportation Safety Board, which published its final report last year, said a blown tire that should have been replaced before the trip began caused the crash. But many of its 54 passengers were killed or injured in part

because they were not wearing seat belts, and many were ejected from the coach as it rolled over.

Monday's announcement comes 42 years after the NTSB, which investigates all major accidents like the one in Sherman, first recommended coaches be equipped with belts, in 1968.

More recently, U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, has twice co-sponsored legislation with U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, to require belts and other safety improvements. But the bills have never survived opposition from lobbyists representing bus manufacturers. Ohio is home to Bluffton University, which saw five members of its baseball team die in a crash in 2007.

The latest bill, known as the Motorcoach Safety Enhancement Act of 2009, is pending in Congress. If it ever passes, it would require bus manufacturers to take additional safety steps.

Concept supported

On Monday, one of the lobbying groups that has worked hardest over the years to defeat bills that would require new seat belts for motorcoaches said it supports LaHood's proposal, at least in principle.

"We have always been supportive of legislation so long as it is based on sound science," said Peter J. Pantuso, president of the American Bus Association, an agency whose political action committee has for years made contributions to members of Congress who have opposed requiring the seat belts. "We have just gone through the proposal, just read it, and I am sure there are some things we agree with and some that we might not. But we certainly support the concept."

Hutchison's co-sponsor said Monday that he still supports the bill before Congress but lauded the Obama administration's new proposed rule.

"Five promising young students at Ohio's Bluffton University lost their lives in a tragic motorcoach accident a few short years ago," Brown said. Today's proposal, he said, means the federal government has "moved closer" to finally doing what the NTSB has been urging for decades and requiring seat belts in commercial buses.

AT A GLANCE: Seat belt mandate

- Seat belts would be mandatory on new motorcoaches.
- The belts would have to be over-the-shoulder straps.
- Most transit and all school buses would be exempt.
- Regulations would take effect three years after the rule becomes final.
- Public comments can be logged until Oct. 18 at www.regulations.gov.