

Status Report

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Mercedes Plans Air Bags in '84 Models

Beginning with 1984 models, optional air bags will be offered in some Mercedes-Benz automobiles for sale in the United States, the manufacturer's U.S. subsidiary has announced.

In a January 28 letter to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), W.R.F. Bodack, president of Mercedes-Benz of North America, said the company would offer air bags on the driver side only, to be sold as a "supplemental restraint system" similar to the system currently offered in several European countries. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 16, No. 17, Nov. 5, 1981.)

The system will consist of a standard 3-point manual safety belt supplemented by an air bag and a knee bolster on the driver side. A 3-point belt will be provided on the passenger side, Bodack said. Initially about 5,000 air bag cars will be offered with additional

units to be provided depending on the market response, Bodack said. The complete text of the letter to Raymond Peck, NHTSA administrator, follows:

Dear Mr. Peck:

This is in further reference to your letter of January 20, 1982 inviting voluntary industry participation in a joint government-industry effort to offer inflatable restraint technology as an option to the American car buyer.

At the direction of the Board of Management of our parent company, Daimler-Benz A.G., I am pleased to advise you that, effective in model year 1984, Mercedes-Benz of North America, Inc. will offer as an option on certain Mercedes-Benz automobiles sold in the United States a Supplemental Restraint System ("SRS"). Similar to the system currently offered in Europe, the SRS will consist of our standard 3-point manual safety belt supplemented by an air bag and knee bolster on the driver's side and a standard 3-point manual safety belt with an Emergency Tensioning Retractor ("ETR") for the right front passenger.

While exact marketing details have not yet been completed, we currently anticipate a three-phase program to introduce this technology in the American market and to test its market acceptability. During Phase I of this program, which will begin in MY 1984, a minimum of 10 percent of our W126 series vehicles as well as a minimum of 10 percent of our new W201 series vehicles (which will be introduced at that time) will be equipped with the SRS. We anticipate this will involve approximately 5,000 vehicles. During this initial phase, the number of units so equipped may be increased if market response warrants.

In Phase II, which will begin in MY 1985, the option will be available in the model 380SL. In addition, if market acceptability continues to increase, a higher

Institute Stresses Variations in Utility Vehicle Experience

There is no justification for requiring all utility vehicles, regardless of the substantial differences in rollover crash experience among individual makes and models of such vehicles, to carry warning stickers, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety has told the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).

The comment was made in response to proposed rulemaking announced by NHTSA in December that would require the stickers for all multipurpose passenger vehicles having special features for off-road use. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 18, No. 1, Jan. 18, 1983.) The stickers would caution operators that the utility vehicles handle differently than passenger cars.

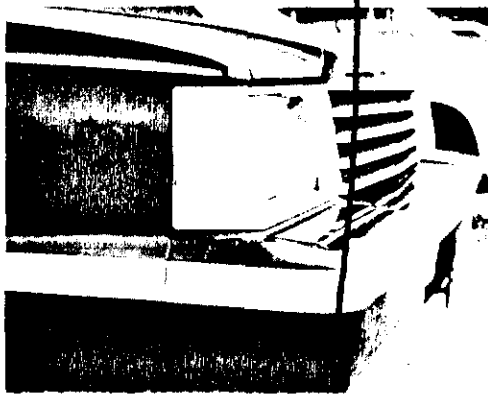
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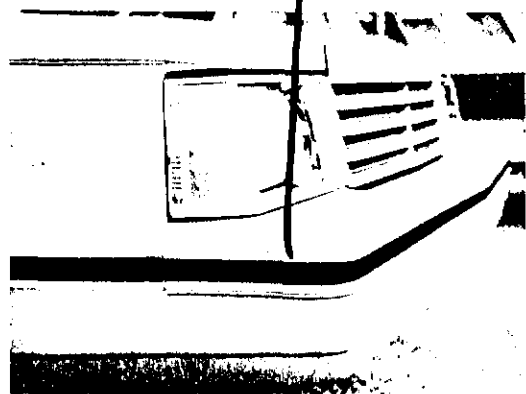
Quoted Without Comment

Looks Deceive as 2 1/2 and 5-mph Bumpers Look Alike — For a consumer looking for a better 5-mph bumper, the outward appearance of the 1983 models is no help in deciding which cars have which bumpers. This is best brought out by some of the 1983 Chrysler K-cars. Chrysler produced some early 1983 K-cars with the 5-mph bumper system while later K-cars had 2 1/2-mph type bumpers using straight brackets rather than energy-absorbers. As shown in the photographs taken of 1983 K-cars on dealer lots, *there is no external visual difference between the two bumpers The only way for a consumer to tell the difference between the two cars is to get down on his hands and knees and look under the front bumper to see whether it has an energy absorber or a straight bracket connecting the bumper to the car's frame.*

— From "A Consumer's Guide to Better Bumpers on 1983 Cars" by the Center for Auto Safety, issued Jan. 17, 1983.



1983 Dodge Aries with 5 mph type bumpers.



1983 Dodge Aries with 2.5 mph type bumpers.

— Photographs from the Center for Auto Safety

Institute Stresses Variations In Utility Vehicle Experience

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Warning that the more common such labels become, the less effective they might become, the Institute suggested, "NHTSA should limit this regulation to specific vehicles that have been shown by competent research to have abnormally bad rollover experience."

NHTSA had cited research supported by the Institute at the University of Michigan Highway Safety Research Institute indicating utility vehicles as a group roll over at a rate at least five times greater than the average passenger car. Yet, "inexplicably," the Institute observed, NHTSA had failed to refer to other Institute-sponsored research at the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center and to research by NHTSA's own National Center for Statistics and Analysis.

"These two studies detail the rollover crash experience of *specific* models of utility vehicles," the Institute commented, "while the earlier HSRI study, in part because of its data limitations, focuses on the ex-

perience of utility vehicles as a group. Detailed examination of the rollover experience of specific makes and models of utility vehicles, contained in the HSRC and NHTSA studies, shows huge variations; both studies show that larger utility vehicles, such as the Jeep Wagoneer, have substantially better rollover experience than small utility vehicles, in particular the Jeep CJ-5."

The NHTSA study still had not been placed in the docket, the Institute pointed out, as it attached a copy of the agency's study to the docket submission to correct this omission.

The Institute also referred NHTSA to Highway Loss Data Institute reports on the insurance injury claims experience of various utility vehicles. "In the most recent such report, the overall frequency of insurance injury claims for the Jeep CJ-5 was 41 percent worse than the average for all passenger cars; for the Jeep CJ-7 the frequency was 17 percent worse than average," the Institute reported. "In contrast, all of the other utility vehicles reported had results that were at least 25 percent *better* than average, and the vehicles with the best experience — the Jeep Cherokee and the Chevrolet Suburban — were almost 50 percent better than average."