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—Allen H. Neuharth, Founder, Sept. 15, 1982

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Outrage over tires brings good news on rollovers

The furor over Bridgestone/Firestone tires and the Ford Explorer may have one worthwhile legacy. A Senate-House conference committee could vote as early as Tuesday to fund a consumer-friendly system that rates the rollover risk of sport-utility vehicles.

Public outcry has eroded the fierce opposition of at least some carmakers to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) rating system. With that powerful lobbying pressure minimized, senators who have tried to delay the new program could let it fly in time for new 2001 vehicles to be rated this winter.

Too bad it took 103 deaths and 400 injuries linked to Firestone tires, most of them on Ford Explorers, to break through nearly three decades of industry opposition and regulatory false starts.

NHTSA long has known that some vehicles are more likely to tip over, particularly those with a high center of gravity and narrow width between the wheels. The proposed system simply would take those measurements and create a rating system to alert the public to how vulnerable each model is to rollover. Consumers could then gauge the risk of cars vs. SUVs, and even the risk among different SUVs.

Sounds sensible enough. But since 1973, the auto industry has blocked all sorts of proposed federal action on rollovers — even as statistics have shown that in fatal, single-vehicle crashes, SUVs roll over far more often than passenger cars. Indeed, in 1997 the death rate in rollovers of small SUVs was four times the rate in cars, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

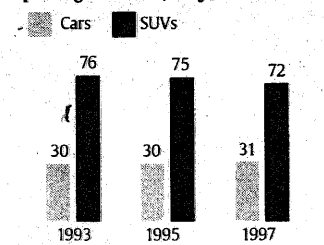
In the wake of the Firestone scandal, Ford is quietly dropping its opposition to ratings, and DaimlerChrysler is doing no individual lobbying against them, according to published reports last week.

But even now, General Motors calls the ratings "far too simplistic." And as recently as Aug. 30 — as news accounts revealed scores

SUVs pose higher risk

In fatal, single-vehicle crashes, the rollover death rate in all types of SUVs has remained more than twice as high as in passenger cars since 1993.

Rollover death rate per million registered passenger vehicles, 1-3 years old:



Source: Insurance Institute for Highway Safety

By Dave Merrill, USA TODAY

of deaths when Firestone tire treads peeled away and Ford Explorers rolled over — Ford still argued that the "principal causes of rollovers are driver and environmental factors that overwhelm the differences that exist among vehicle classes or categories."

Neither GM nor Ford mentioned the growing popularity of SUVs and their huge impact on profits.

Safety advocates want NHTSA to do more by mandating a rollover performance standard. And certainly continued vigilance is needed. If the ratings become reality, carmakers could seize on them as a reason to argue that further action is unnecessary.

But even imperfect ratings are better than none. And they could push carmakers to do more to address rollover risk.

That's what happened after NHTSA began rating vehicles for crashworthiness in 1979. Since then, more and more vehicles have climbed onto the ratings' top rungs.

Ratings shouldn't be the finale. But they're a solid first act in a long-delayed rollover-prevention plan.

Today's debate: Decline in pro bono work

Lawyers leave poor behind

Our view:
Volunteerism in legal profession drops as salaries rise.

For weeks, the head of the Arizona Civil Liberties Union has been asking law firms to represent, on a volunteer basis, a client in a free-speech case against the state government. And for weeks, Eleanor Eisenberg has been turned down.

Eisenberg knows firsthand what national statistics are now showing: Law firms are bucking the national trend toward charity

yers at many firms have been told to work more hours — 2,000 per year in some cases — to bring in more revenue, according to findings from the Pro Bono Institute at Georgetown University.

Some firms in Washington, D.C., Texas and California have stopped or cut back on counting pro bono hours as part of their lawyers' work time, institute president Esther Lardent says. With management creating that sort of an atmosphere, it's no surprise that charitable work at all but a dozen of the nation's biggest firms gets short shrift.

The ABA's own statistics show that 80% of

School debate

In his commentary, "As a parent, Gore abandons public schools," writer Samuel Freedman abandons logic and enrolls in the "Bush for president" campaign (The Forum, Wednesday). Al Gore has every right to send his children to private schools while being passionately dedicated to improving public education for the vast majority of citizens who cannot afford to send their children to ultra-expensive private schools.

When it comes to education, Republicans say don't throw money at a problem. When it comes to the military, the GOP fires money at a problem as fast as it can be printed. Republicans constantly criticize teachers and try to mask that attack by claiming that they do not hate teachers, only the teachers' unions.

No reason to cry over high prices

I don't like the "high" gasoline price any more than anyone else. However, I'm not complaining ("Truckers suffer as price of fuel is 'going crazy,'" News, Sept. 18).

In 1967, the price of gasoline was 31 cents per gallon. According to the inflation calculator on the Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index's home Web page, that equates to \$1.53 today.

Automobile fuel economy in 1967 was about 12 to 16 miles per gallon. Today, a car typically gets about 22 to 30 miles per gallon.

On that basis, our automobile fuel cost today are almost 50% lower than 33 years ago.

Furnaces are more efficient today, so home fuel-oil heating costs are also lower. Thus, we have no good reason to complain.

MacArthur El
Hammond, L.

'Apples and oranges'

USA TODAY reader Bill Young implies that drivers of sport utility vehicles are somehow at least partially responsible for

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