

Road-safety regulator rapped over regulating autonomous cars

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In this Dec. 18, 2018 file photo, one of the test vehicles from Argo AI, Ford's autonomous vehicle unit, navigates through the strip district near the company offices in Pittsburgh. The nation's road-safety regulator is under fire again for what critics call lax oversight of tests involving autonomous vehicles. The nation's top transportation safety investigator said Tuesday, Nov. 19, 2019, that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration doesn't give enough direction to companies developing more automated cars. (AP Photo/Keith Srakocic, File)

The nation's road-safety regulator is under fire again for what critics call lax oversight of tests involving autonomous vehicles.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration doesn't give enough direction to companies developing automatic cars, the chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board said Tuesday.

Senators quizzed NHTSA's acting administrator on why the agency hasn't set standards for automatic braking and steering systems that are becoming more common, and why the agency hasn't confronted Tesla about widely shared hacks that let drivers take their hands off the steering wheel.

NHTSA's acting administrator, James Owens, told lawmakers that his agency is assessing autonomous vehicle technology and researching how people interact with it. He said, however, that the agency fears it could stifle innovation if it goes too far in regulating technology that is still evolving.

The comments at a hearing of the Senate Commerce Committee came one day after the transportation safety board blamed a distracted occupant for letting an autonomous Uber test car strike and kill a pedestrian last year. The board accused NHTSA of failing to adequately oversee autonomous-vehicle testing. Board member Jennifer Homendy accused NHTSA of putting technology advancement above saving lives.

The NTSB recommended that NHTSA require car developers to submit safety reports, and that NHTSA review the plans to make sure the companies have safeguards in place—for instance, to make sure operators are paying attention while the vehicles are moving.

Currently those reports are voluntary, and few companies file them—16 so far, while there are about 80 companies testing autonomous cars, according to safety board Chairman Robert Sumwalt. He said some of those plans are nothing more than marketing brochures.

"The manufacturers are not going to be objective in evaluating their own safety assessments," Sumwalt told the senators. "There needs to be a federal look at these assessments to make sure that they are done properly."

Owens said NHTSA will evaluate the NTSB recommendations.

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