



United States
General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

159664

Resources, Community, and
Economic Development Division

B-278800

December 19, 1997

The Honorable Don Young
House of Representatives

Subject: Highway Safety: NHTSA's Motorcycle Helmet Activities

Dear Mr. Young:

As you requested, we reviewed the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA) funding of motorcycle helmet activities. Specifically, you asked us to follow up on our June 25, 1997, report to you on this issue¹ and determine (1) how much NHTSA obligated and expended for motorcycle helmet activities annually during fiscal years 1994 through 1997, (2) whether the funds are having their desired effect by reducing the number of fatal head injuries, and (3) whether these expenditures are having their desired effect by influencing the number of states that have helmet laws.

NHTSA'S FUNDING OF MOTORCYCLE HELMET ACTIVITIES

Information provided by NHTSA shows that it obligated an average of \$123,104 annually to activities pertaining to motorcycle helmet safety during fiscal years 1994 through 1997.² However, the funds obligated for motorcycle helmet

¹NHTSA's Activities Concerning State Motorcycle Helmet Laws (GAO/RCED-97-185R, June 25, 1997).

²Our June 1997 report to you stated that on average about \$74,000 was budgeted for motorcycle helmet activities. The larger amount—\$123,104—represents (1) additional amounts budgeted and obligated from June through September 1997 in fiscal year 1997 and (2) \$100,000 budgeted and obligated in fiscal year 1995 that NHTSA did not previously report to us. These obligations do not include NHTSA employees' salaries. NHTSA characterizes funds as both budgeted and obligated, when a contract is actually awarded and expended when a contractor's invoices are paid.

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activities were not spread uniformly over this period. As shown in table 1, the annual obligations ranged from a low of \$10,492 to a high of \$204,138. The table also presents NHTSA's expenditures for motorcycle helmet activities for fiscal years 1994 through 1997. Expenditures in a fiscal year may be higher or lower than obligations that year because payments (expenditures) may occur in years subsequent to the obligations.

Table 1: NHTSA's Obligations and Expenditures for Motorcycle Helmet Activities, Fiscal Years 1994-97

Fiscal year	Obligations	Expenditures
1994	\$ 10,492	\$ 48,421
1995	126,388	4,271
1996	204,138 ^a	26,388
1997	51,398	156,921
Total	\$492,416	\$236,001

^aThe fiscal year 1996 obligations of \$204,138 for motorcycle helmet activities include a \$149,060 contract for a video and white paper for state legislators.

Source: NHTSA.

THE ROLE OF HELMETS IN REDUCING MOTORCYCLE FATALITIES

Research by NHTSA has shown that when motorcycle crashes do occur, the most important factor in reducing injury is personal protection for the motorcyclist with equipment such as a jacket and trousers, gloves, proper footwear, eye protection, and a helmet. According to NHTSA, a helmet is by far the motorcycle rider's most important safety equipment. NHTSA points to the fact that head injury is a leading cause of death in motorcycle crashes; since 1989, the states that enacted universal helmet laws (applying to all motorcycle riders) have experienced reductions in fatalities ranging from 15 percent to 37 percent in the first year.³ Also, in two 1991 reports, we evaluated 46 studies relative to motorcycle helmet laws.⁴ Eleven of these studies compared fatality

³Helmets have also been shown to reduce the severity of injury among surviving accident victims.

⁴Highway Safety: Interim Report on Safety Belt and Motorcycle Helmet Effectiveness (GAO/RCED-91-158, May 10, 1991) and Highway Safety:

(continued...)

rates between helmeted and nonhelmeted motorcycle accident victims. All of these studies indicated a lower incidence of deaths among helmeted riders, ranging from 28 percent to 73 percent lower, depending on the rider population studied. Finally, NHTSA's 1996 report on crash outcomes, which the Congress directed the agency to prepare, found that motorcycle helmets are 34 percent effective in preventing fatal injuries and 67 percent effective in preventing serious brain injuries.⁵

STATES' EFFORTS TO REPEAL MOTORCYCLE HELMET LAWS

As of 1975, 47 states had enacted laws requiring helmet use by all motorcycle riders. The Department of Transportation (DOT) required state highway safety programs to provide for universal helmet use, and a portion of federal-aid highway funds was withheld from states without approved safety programs. Legislation enacted in 1976, however, prohibited DOT from requiring universal helmet laws as part of state highway safety programs and from withholding federal funds from states without such laws. In 1976 through 1980, 27 states repealed or weakened their laws requiring helmet use. Subsequently, the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 required the transfer of up to 3 percent of highway construction funds to highway safety programs for states without universal helmet laws.⁶ This provision was repealed by the National Highway System Designation Act of 1995. During 1996 and 1997, legislation was introduced in 20 states to repeal or weaken motorcycle helmet laws. As of early November 1997, repeal efforts had been defeated in 15 states but had succeeded in 2 states. Action is pending in the remaining three states. Figure 1 shows the status of state motorcycle helmet laws as of early November 1997.

⁴(...continued)

Motorcycle Helmet Laws Save Lives and Reduce Costs to Society (GAO/RCED-91-170, July 29, 1991).

⁵Benefits of Safety Belts and Motorcycle Helmets, NHTSA's report to the Congress (Feb. 1996), was based on data from the Crash Outcome Data Evaluation System (CODES).

⁶The transfer of highway construction funds from three programs to highway safety funds was set at 1.5 percent for fiscal year 1995 and 3 percent for fiscal year 1996 and thereafter.

Nonetheless, it is NHTSA's position that the state legislature, the governor, and the citizens of a state are the ones responsible for making the final decision on whether helmet laws remain in effect. NHTSA has stated that its role in the debate over repealing states' motorcycle helmet laws is to provide data and information that will be helpful in making that decision.

AGENCY COMMENTS

We provided a draft of this report to DOT for its review and comment. DOT had no comments on the draft.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

Our analysis of NHTSA's funding of motorcycle helmet activities is based on obligation and expenditure data provided by NHTSA for pertinent contracts for fiscal years 1994 through 1997. To review motorcycle fatalities, we reviewed relevant studies and data, including our 1991 reports, which encompassed 46 studies that contained original data or analyses and met our minimum criteria for methodological soundness.⁷ We also reviewed a February 1996 NHTSA report to the Congress that was mandated by section 1031(b) of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991.⁸ In addition, we analyzed NHTSA's statistics on motorcycle fatalities in terms of motorcycle registrations and miles traveled. We reviewed federal legislative requirements concerning motorcycle helmets and obtained data on the status of states' mandatory helmet laws from NHTSA. We performed our work in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards, from October through December 1997.

We are sending copies of this report to the congressional committees and subcommittees with responsibilities for highway safety matters, the Secretary of Transportation, and the Administrator of NHTSA. We will make copies available to others upon request.

⁷See footnote 4.

⁸See footnote 5.

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Please call me at (202) 512-3650 if you have any questions. Major contributors to this report were Helen Desaulniers, Yvonne Pufahl, and James Ratzenberger.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Phyllis F. Scheinberg". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the "Sincerely yours," text.

Phyllis F. Scheinberg
Associate Director, Transportation Issues

(348052)

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