

## Ex-NHTSA chief fears new safety technologies will take back seat to new mpg rules, recession

by USATODAY.com

When she headed the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration from 2006-08, Nicole Nason was in charge of both auto safety regulation and federal gas mileage standards. Safety advocates have long argued the two roles are in conflict and many studies have shown that downsizing cars and trucks to meet fuel economy rules has led to thousands more traffic deaths.

Now, Nason is speaking out on the Obama administration's tough new fuel economy rules, which she fears come at the expense of safety. Nason, a mother of three, especially fears what the costly new environmental rules, plus the recession, will do to automakers' plans for new crash-avoidance technologies. In a recent op-ed piece in the Detroit News and a conversation with USA TODAY, Nason worried that money pressures may prompt makers to cut back or kill plans for driver warnings for lane-departure and danger of rear-ending another car. "Take a ride on any local highway and you will see how desperately America needs those alert systems," Nason wrote.

Most of the technologies Nason is talking about are found on some luxury models, often part of higher-end option packages. Infiniti, Volvo and BMW are among the automakers with lane-keeping devices. Mercedes-Benz and Volvo are among those with systems that apply brakes if you don't brake before you're nose-to-behind with the car ahead.

Drivers disagree on whether such systems are annoying or helpful. But Nason notes thousands of people die in sleep-related crashes each year, suggesting a pesky lane buzzer is a small price to pay. Some systems, such as BMW's vibrating steering wheel, can seem less intrusive. "Our philosophy about lane departure warning and blind spot detection is that it is a tool for the driver but should not alarm the passenger," says BMW spokesman Tom Plucinsky.

Ellen Bernstein of Manahawkin, N.J., says she'd love to try some of these technologies, which she thinks will be most useful for elderly drivers with vision problems. But Doug Rapp of New River, Ariz., thinks the "tech-savvy young crowd, which loves these kinds of bells and whistles" will be most accepting. "The middle-aged and older crowd still drive the way they were taught," he says.

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