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STATEMENT OF PAUL SNODGRASS  
NATIONAL HIGHWAY TRAFFIC SAFETY ADMINISTRATION  
U. S. DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

NEVADA SENATE TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE  
APRIL 10, 2003

I am here today in response to a letter from the Nevada Department of Employment, Training and Rehabilitation, to provide the Committee information on motorcycle helmets and helmet laws. My oral remarks will be brief; I have a written statement to be submitted for the official record.

Motorcycle helmet laws are an important component of a comprehensive motorcycle safety program. This comprehensive approach focuses on preventing crashes, reducing injuries, and providing for rapid emergency medical response if a crash occurs. Working to prevent crashes by training and licensing riders is an important step. But when crashes occur . . . and they will, perhaps through no fault of the rider, a rider needs to be protected from injury.

Wearing the right kind of gear can protect the rider and reduce the potential severity of injuries. Leather jackets, pants, and gloves protect the rider from road rash. But the simple act of wearing a helmet is the most effective measure a rider can take to prevent what can often be life-threatening injuries. Helmet use laws for all motorcycle riders are the most effective method of increasing and maintaining helmet usage.

The current law is saving lives, preventing injuries and reducing health care costs. In 1997 alone, the current helmet law saved the lives of nine motorcyclists in Nevada. These nine people were someone's mother, father, daughter, son, wife, husband, granddaughter, or grandson. By requiring motorcyclists to wear a motorcycle

helmet, this law also saved countless others from brain and other head injuries.

Few highway safety topics have been as closely examined as motorcycle helmet use laws. A wealth of scientifically-valid studies exist and the conclusions are clear:

- motorcycle helmets prevent deaths and costly injuries;
- a helmet use law is the most effective means to increase helmet use;
- in the absence of all riders laws, measures such as training, education, and age-specific laws have not proven effective; and
- society pays a high price to care for those injured in motorcycle crashes as it does with those injured in other motor vehicle crashes.

Research has consistently shown that un-helmeted motorcyclists involved in motorcycle crashes are 40 percent more likely to sustain a fatal head injury and 15 percent more likely to incur non-fatal head injuries, than crash victims wearing helmets.

Seven states (*Hawaii, Maine, Missouri, New York, Pennsylvania, Utah, and Wisconsin*) collected information on injuries and medical costs in the CODES project and reported that motorcycle helmets are 35 percent effective in preventing fatalities and 67 percent effective in preventing brain injuries. These states reported that, on average, \$15,000 of in-patient hospital cost would be saved during the first 12 months for every injured rider who did not suffer a brain injury.

Research has also shown the positive effects of motorcycle helmet laws. During the mid 1970's into the early 1980's, 28 states weakened or repealed motorcycle helmet use laws. A NHTSA study showed these repeals were associated with an estimated 20 percent increase in motorcycle fatalities. A 1991 study conducted by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) confirmed the safety benefits of motorcycle

helmets and motorcycle helmet use laws. Nevada can expect a 20 percent increase in motorcycle rider fatalities if the current law is repealed.

Let's briefly, look at the effectiveness of the current motorcycle helmet law in Nevada. This motorcycle helmet law works, plain and simple. Again, it is worth noting that nine motorcyclists traveling or visiting this beautiful state in 1997 were saved by the law. It also saves money. The current Nevada helmet law saved almost 12 million dollars in 1997 alone. In addition, countless head and brain injuries were prevented.

If we look at the period from 1984 through 1997, NHTSA estimates that 79 motorcyclists riding Nevada's highways were saved because they wore a helmet. Unfortunately, even with a law, not all motorcycle riders wear helmets. During the same time period, if every single motorcyclist had worn a helmet, we estimate 98 lives would have been saved. Lives saved simply by wearing a motorcycle helmet.

Equally as important, however, is the effect this single piece of safety equipment has on the families of motorcyclists. Imagine if you will, the anguish a father and mother must go through knowing that their son or daughter might have been saved by wearing a motorcycle helmet. By simply wearing a helmet, Nevada's motorcyclists can spare their families needless grief, suffering, and financial hardship.

Helmet law opponents state that experience is the best teacher. Let's look at Nevada fatal motorcycle crashes and see what the experience says. Experience tells us that this legislation would not protect that age group which represents the highest number of motorcycle rider fatalities. In Nevada, from 1985 through 1997, 269 motorcyclists died in traffic crashes. Of those 269 deaths, 57 were recorded as not wearing a helmet (and 4 died where helmet use was not known or not recorded). Of those 57 victims not wearing a helmet, 80 percent were age 20 or older and 54 percent

were between 20 and 39 years of age. Clearly, weakening the Nevada helmet law to cover those riders under the age of 20 leaves unprotected those riders within the age groups that experience the highest number and percentage of fatalities.

Before closing I would like to review the facts about the effectiveness of motorcycle helmets and motorcycle helmet laws for all riders.

- 1) If the current helmet law is repealed, motorcycle deaths on Nevada's highways will increase 20 percent. Experience tells us so.
  - 2) Motorcycle helmets do not reduce the possibility of a crash; but when crashes happen a motorcycle helmet is the single most important piece of protection a motorcyclist has to prevent serious brain injuries or death.
  - 3) A motorcycle helmet use law that covers all riders is the most effective method of increasing and maintaining high levels of helmet usage.
- Let's keep Nevada's motorcyclists free from injuries and death by keeping this law.

This concludes my remarks and I will be happy to answer any questions.