

I am responding to the press release--#03NR33-- issued by the Motorcycle Riders Foundation (MRF) on September 26, 2003, that accuses the United States, specifically the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), of attempting to somehow use a United Nations technical working group to require certain protective gear for U.S. motorcycle riders. Because the MRF release contains inaccuracies that affect not only NHTSA, but as well the United Nations, I feel compelled to reply.

It is important to begin with the role of NHTSA with respect to motorcyclists. It is our aim to protect motorcyclists while making riding enjoyable. Our motorcycle safety program stresses a balanced approach that recognizes that the full range of making motorcycling safer depends on using science-based evidence and state crash data to establish and promote safety programs. This includes urging better, affordable rider training and education, reducing impairment among riders, improving licensing programs, promoting the use of protective gear, including helmets, and working to make the roadway infrastructure more rider friendly.

The United States participates in a number of international groups for the purpose of exchanging global best traffic and vehicle safety practices. This international work is important not only for Americans living here in the U.S., but also for Americans working or traveling abroad. Roadway injuries are a leading cause of death of Americans abroad and, consequently, the U.S. government searches for ways to reduce them. This includes learning about how other countries promote safer motorcycling.

MRF's 9/26 press release is inaccurate, particularly as it reports that the United States is attempting to use a technical work group of the United Nations to mandate universal helmet laws in the United States. MRF did not accurately describe the purpose and mandate of the Working Party 1 (WP 1) on Road Safety and misled the public by suggesting that WP 1 is empowered to mandate laws in the United States or that it has the authority to impose other obligations on the U.S.

WP 1's mandate is two-fold: to try to harmonize European road signs, driver's licensing, tunnel safety practices, etc., and to use the meetings to discuss successful safety programs around the globe in order to help one another identify programs and interventions which have been applied successfully elsewhere. The focus of the next WP 1 meeting, for example, is on the topic of aggressive driving around the world and remedies to address it. This is not a group authorized to "mandate world-wide motorcycle helmet laws."

The United States works very collegially with WP 1 member nations, and, in the case of the Motorcycle Working Group, with important motorcycle interest groups like FEMA, FIM and IMMA. In fact, these three organizations, along with the U.S., form the Working Group members. The intended outcome of the work of this Group is to survey member countries, capture an inventory of other countries' motorcycle safety programs and collect successful safety programs that have resulted in fewer motorcyclists' deaths and injuries.

The MRF not only misrepresented the mandate of WP 1 but also mistakenly confused its role with that of another Working Party of the U.N., Working Party 29 that works to harmonize vehicle safety standards. The press release further incorrectly describes the commitment of the U.S. under WP 29. For example, MRF misstated the extent of the obligations of the U.S. under an agreement (the 1998 Global Agreement) administered by WP 29. That agreement was crafted carefully in order to preserve US sovereignty and only compels the US to consider adopting certain vehicle standards. The MRF appears to have confused the roles of these very different UN Working Parties, assuming that all UN Working Parties are the same.

I believe the MRF should set the record straight and revise its September 26 press release to report accurately on this important international safety effort. MRF should be interested in getting the story right.

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