

Deeply concerned Crash victims families ask DOT not to water down Tesla oversight

The families of several people killed or seriously injured in crashes involving Teslas using self-driving technologies are asking Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy not to allow Elon Musk to influence crash probes or oversight rules.

By Chris Marquette

The families of several people who died or were seriously injured in Tesla crashes involving self-driving technologies urged the Transportation Department on Tuesday to continue scrutinizing the electric vehicle company, saying they fear oversight of Elon Musk's company will suffer under the Trump administration.

In a letter to Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy, seven families say they are worried that the Trump administration will repeal [a rule that requires companies to report](#) vehicle crashes involving advanced driver assistance technologies or automated driving systems, such as the erroneously-named suite of Tesla features called "Autopilot" and "full self driving." In addition, the letter asks Duffy to ensure ongoing federal probes into Tesla continue "free from improper influence."

"We are deeply concerned that NHTSA's oversight of autonomous vehicle (AV) systems may be weakened," especially when it comes to the potential for that rule to be repealed. "We fear this important measure is under threat given recent media reports and the influence of Tesla CEO Elon Musk, whose company operates the most widely used [advanced driver assistance technologies] in America," the letter says.

The families' concerns about the staggering scope and influence Musk inserts on seemingly every agency — including the ability to cut employee rolls to the bone, terminate or initiate contracts and short circuit the will of Congress — echo growing alarm among Democrats about serious conflicts of interest presented by Musk, whose influence over agencies that regulate his businesses appears significant.

Tesla is regulated in part by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, which has the power to investigate automakers and recall cars with defective parts or designs. Several NHTSA employees who worked in an arm of NHTSA that investigates and recalls defective vehicles [were terminated in the purge](#) of probationary employees last month. The agency is in the process of bringing them back along with others who were terminated — but even larger layoffs are looming in the wings, including at DOT.

Indeed, NHTSA under the Biden administration forced recalls and initiated investigations into Tesla's "Full Self Driving" system, including an inquiry that stemmed from four incidents where Teslas crashed in poor visibility while using the technology. In one of those crashes, a Tesla struck and killed a pedestrian. In April 2024, NHTSA opened an investigation into whether Tesla's recall of two million vehicles to install new safety measures for "Autopilot" was adequate, following reports of crashes involving the newly installed software updates, [according to a report from Reuters](#).

Signatories on the letter include Neima Benavides, whose sister Naibel [died in 2019](#) when a Tesla Model S, which had Autopilot engaged, crashed into her parked car. The Tesla had blown through a caution light and a stop sign before the impact, which killed Naibel and seriously injured her boyfriend Dillon Angulo.

"The deaths of our loved ones were preventable. As Secretary, you have the power to ensure these tragedies are not repeated. By maintaining strong federal safeguards, you can prevent more families from having to face the same heartbreak we have endured," they wrote.

In a statement, a DOT spokesperson said Duffy's "heart goes out to the victims' families, and he takes their concerns seriously."

"As the Secretary made clear during his confirmation hearing, he is committed to allowing NHTSA's investigators to follow the evidence and operate objectively," the spokesperson continued, adding that "the agency will continue to enforce the law on all manufacturers of motor vehicles and equipment in accordance with the Vehicle Safety Act and the agency's data-driven, risk-based investigative process."