

Case 9

One of the most popular and profitable vehicles on the road today is the sports utility vehicle (SUV). Auto makers like the vehicle because they can make \$8,000-\$20,000 profit on each one. Consumers like the SUV because of its multiple use capacities - the family car and the rugged adventuresome truck. But the big tall vehicle has an Achilles' heel; it rolls over much more frequently than a standard car. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), last year rollovers accounted for 66% of SUV deaths, but for only about 20% of deaths in cars.

Vehicle manufacturers are aware of the rollover problem. They have placed warning statements in owners' manuals for almost twenty years, informing motorists that the "vehicle may roll over" if the driver makes sharp turns, as in an accident avoidance situation. Additionally, the SUV's high center of gravity and narrower track can be deadly when a vehicle swerves at freeway speeds. In the past twenty years, though, little has been done to design greater stability in the vehicle.

Information regarding the risks of driving an SUV has not been shared with consumers. A record 3.1 million SUV's were sold last year to many consumers who were unaware they could tip over if they hit a curb, soft shoulder, ditch, loose gravel, or guard rail. NHTSA has asked for "consumer information notices," but still has proposed no minimum safety or stability requirements for SUV's. Last year NHTSA pledged to issue consumer information on crash tests, however, Congress, under pressure from the auto industry, blocked plans to publish rollover ratings.

The *New York Times* printed an analysis of federal crash statistics in November 2000 showing that since 1991 occupants of Ford Explorers have been 2.3 times as likely to die in rollovers (tire related or not) than occupants in traditional cars. They are nearly twice as likely to die in rollovers as are occupants of Jeep Cherokees and Grand Cherokees, SUVs that are built like cars. (The Explorer is essentially a roomy passenger cabin with luxury seats and family friendly amenities bolted onto a Ranger pickup frame. This allows Ford to build the Explorer on the Ranger assembly line, using many of the same robots and parts.) Additionally, the analysis showed that Explorer's fatal rollover rate has been rising considerably. Rates for cars and Jeep SUVs have remained steady (40 fatal rollovers per million vehicles), while the Explorer's rates rose from 53 per million in 1994 to 121 per million last year.

In addition to the rollover problem, SUV's are not required to meet the same safety standards as passenger cars. In this regard, SUV occupants are not protected by the side-impact crash safety, air bag, or bumper strength standards that apply to passenger automobiles.