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# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

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### Opening Statement Congressman Dennis Kucinich January 25, 2012

#### Hearing on "Volt Vehicle Fire: What did NHTSA Know and When Did they Know It?" Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on Regulatory Affairs, Stimulus Oversight and Government Spending

Good Morning. Today, we once again welcome David Strickland, the Administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration before our Subcommittee. At two other recent hearings, this Subcommittee heard testimony from Department of Transportation officials, first on regulations proposed by the Department related to standards for vehicle fuel efficiency and then on the number of hours truck drivers can work between mandatory rest periods. At those hearings, the majority criticized the Department of Transportation for considering stricter regulations, claiming they were harmful to business and the economy. Today, by contrast, the question is whether the Department of Transportation was strict enough in its regulatory oversight of one product, the Chevy Volt electric vehicle, by General Motors.

The title of today's hearing is, "What did NHTSA Know about the Volt Vehicle Fire and When Did they Know It?" A very detailed, one-hundred-and-thirty-five page final report by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration on its investigation into the Volt Battery Fire Incident, which was made public on Friday, provides detailed answers to the question this hearing seems to ask. GM has also provided extensive documentation of meetings and information it provided NHTSA pursuant to its investigation into the causes of the Volt battery fire that occurred after crash testing.

Based on what we know so far, NHTSA's New Car Assessment Program appeared to do just what it is intended to do: catch potential safety concerns with new cars before they become a risk to consumers. And General Motors appeared to do exactly what we would hope it would do. Even before NHTSA determined whether or not there was a real safety issue, it designed improvements to the Volt to make its battery better protected from risk of intrusion or fires. So far, we have seen no evidence to support the implication that NHTSA has allowed politics to guide its decision-making.

Considering that in the last few months there have been efforts by the majority to defund programs that support the development of technologies for electric and alternative fuel vehicles, and other proposals to take away tax incentives for purchasing electric cars, I am concerned that the intended effect of this hearing is to undermine technology that is critical to both protecting the environment and ensuring the success of the U.S. auto manufacturing industry, as well as

U.S. economic competitiveness generally. Trying to kill electric vehicles is bad for America's future.

As we established at the hearing this Subcommittee held on the proposed fuel economy and greenhouse gas emissions standards, clean vehicle technologies protect public health by cutting air pollutants, smog, and climate change pollution. Additionally, developing clean vehicle technologies for battery-electric and hybrid cars has grown jobs on the assembly line and supported the recovery of the domestic automotive industry. We don't want to be buying lithium-ion batteries from China in five years when we can develop the infrastructure and skills to make them here in the U.S. And we want to build cars here in the U.S. that are attractive to consumers in other countries, where electric and other clean vehicle technologies have already established market share.

Now, let me be clear: I am a consumer advocate. I support early public disclosure of safety risks, and I hope and expect that NHTSA consistently works as quickly as possible to make intelligent assessments of any safety risks and to disclose them to consumers as soon as practicable. And if the majority wanted to work with me to craft stricter laws mandating that, I might join them. But I will not hold my breath.

I hope this Committee's activity on this issue will not discourage companies like GM from continuing to innovate and advance technologies that will ensure U.S. competitiveness. And, while it appears we have different opinions with respect to whether the Chevy Volt is a "fiery failure" or an innovative success, at least it appears that we have agreement that there is a proper role for government to play in regulating business and ensuring public safety.