

## **PR firm's ad campaign says abandoning SUVs could cost drivers their lives**

- TIM MOLLOY, Associated Press Writer  
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A public relations firm with automaker clients is trying to derail proposed stricter state clean air regulations with ads warning that the first-in-the-nation rules would force drivers to abandon SUVs for smaller cars that could endanger their lives.

The ads conflict with National Highway Traffic Safety Administration data released earlier this month that found SUV drivers were slightly more likely to die in accidents than people driving cars, and almost three times as likely to die in rollovers.

SUVs, light trucks and vans also were far more likely to kill or seriously injure people in accidents than cars, the NHTSA found.

The print and radio ads are sponsored by the Sport Utility Vehicle Owners of America, a group purchased two years ago by the Washington, D.C.-based public relations firm Strat(at)comm.

The campaign features clowns who say the regulations would pack drivers into cars like clowns at the circus.

Ron Defore, an owner of Strat(at)comm who acts as a spokesman for SUVOA, said the federal data unfairly grouped older SUVs with newer, safer models.

"Unfortunately you even have people at NHTSA now who are anti-SUV," said Defore, who served as NHTSA director of public and consumer affairs in the mid-1980s. "You can cut the data any way you want."

The California Air Resources Board is scheduled to vote Sept. 23 on rules that would limit greenhouse gases from vehicles beginning in 2009.

The rules call for smaller engines and other technological changes to cut emissions by 25 percent for cars and light trucks, and about 18 percent for larger trucks and SUVs.

Defore said studies by the insurance industry have shown that smaller cars fare worse in accidents than SUVs, and past trends toward smaller vehicles have caused up to 50,000 traffic deaths -- "about as many people as we lost in the Vietnam War."

Environmentalists derided SUVOA as a phony grassroots, or "AstroTurf," organization.

"Clearly SUVOA is an industry front group," said Roland Hwang, vehicles policy director at the Natural Resources Defense Council. "They pay AstroTurf groups to make claims that they're too embarrassed to make themselves. This group is clearly fact-challenged."

Defore said the group has 23,000 supporters and raises money from donations and banner ads on its Web site. Strat(at)comm counts Daimler Chrysler, Ford Motor Co., General Motors and auto industry trade groups among its clients.

Regulators estimated the state's new clean air proposals would initially add about \$292 to the cost of a car or small truck, and \$308 to the cost of a large pickup or SUV.

Several other states and Canada are expected to adopt the emissions rules.

California makes up about 10 percent of the national auto market, and the new rules could lead automakers to voluntarily reduce the size of their vehicles.

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