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April 22, 2008

## Feature: Electronic Stability Control: why your car should have it

By Glen Nicholson

*(Last week, safety advocate Glen Nicholson examined how electronic stability control works and how important it is to saving lives. This week, he examines what governments, corporations and insurers are doing, and not doing, to promote ESC - ed. Click here to read Part 1 )*

Everyone will benefit from the safety benefits of ESC, but as former Chrysler President, Lee Iacocca once said, "Safety doesn't sell." ESC has been available since 1995, yet few have considered its profound importance. No one escapes responsibility for raising awareness of ESC. So what are the stakeholders doing?

### Auto Suppliers

Mercedes-Benz gets credit for being first out of the gate. Hyundai wins the award for the most prominent ESC advertising in Canada. Most high-end marques such as Audi, Lexus, Acura, BMW, and Volvo make ESC standard. VW will become the first mainstream manufacturer to make ESC standard on all its 2009 U.S. models. Other automakers will soon follow, and some are prioritizing ESC for SUV's because of their tendency to roll over.

However, while some automakers offer affordable ESC, others bundle it with pricey options such as six-cylinder motors. Imagine the outcry if seatbelts were available only on luxury cars or as a costly option!

Many auto suppliers do a poor job of educating sales staff and few are telling the Canadian public about ESC. Advertising generally pitches style over safety. Ads promoting safety typically show airbags and other passive devices that work after the crash. Some auto sales people downplay ESC because they want to sell the non-ESC vehicles in stock.

Manufacturers such as Bosch, Continental, Bendix and others make ESC systems for passenger cars, vans, SUV's, pickup trucks, motorhomes, buses, commercial trucks and trailers. They actively promote ESC in their own commercial interest, as well as the public good.

### Governments

In 2005, Quebec introduced the world's first ESC law, mandating it for carriers of dangerous goods without data recorders.

However, dozens of requests calling on Canadian Federal and Provincial governments to promote ESC for all passenger vehicles have yielded little but finger-pointing. For example, British Columbia's Transport Minister says it is the job of the Public Safety Minister, who says he will wait for the United States to make ESC mandatory.

Health Canada's consumer product safety division defines hazardous products to exclude motor vehicles. Although ESC could save hundreds of millions of dollars in health care spending and reduce hospital service disruptions, Health Ministers point to Transport Canada.

The British Columbia Forest Safety Ombudsman recently released his safety report on resource (logging, mining) roads calling on the BC government to "take the lead in advocating for Electronic Stability Control systems for all new industrial, commercial and private vehicles." However, the government has not responded.

The Chancellor of Germany has endorsed ESC. European Commissioner Viviane Reding declared, "Time is short. Each new car that is sold without ESC is a lost opportunity to save lives and reduce suffering." However, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper replied, "A copy of your correspondence has been forwarded to the Honourable Lawrence Cannon, Minister of Transport. I am certain that the Minister will appreciate being made aware of your views."

Opposition Transport Critics asked Transport Minister Cannon to promote and fund ESC. However, he has not adequately funded a small group within Transport Canada who are working diligently to develop an ESC awareness campaign.

Liberal Transport Critic Joe Volpe introduced a private member's bill to mandate ESC because Transport Minister Lawrence Cannon had not developed an ESC regulation. Transport Canada will probably impose a regulation mandating ESC for passenger vehicles effective September 1, 2011.

The US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) jumped when they realized the effectiveness of ESC. NHTSA head, Nicole Nason, said, "We have the chance, right now, to save lives on an almost unprecedented scale on highways around the world. I am talking about Electronic Stability Control (ESC). We believe that ESC is the greatest life saving technology since the safety belt. Time is money. We know that in the area of vehicle safety, time is also lives. This is particularly true for a high benefit technology like ESC. The faster we act, the more lives we can save."

The US fast-tracked a regulation making ESC mandatory in all cars and light trucks starting with 55% of 2009 models, 75% of 2010 models, 95% of 2011 models, and

A driver demonstrates ESC in a Mini Cooper at a ChooseESC! event in Rome. Click image to enlarge [Click here to read Part 1 of "Electronic Stability Control: why your car should have it"](#) by Glen Nicholson

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In February, 2008, Australian States announced ESC legislation for all passenger vehicles starting September 1, 2011.

In June, 2008, the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe will complete a Global Technical Regulation to harmonize ESC standards for 56 countries, including Canada.

Sweden has a different approach. Without any regulation, the Swedish government firmly recommended ESC to the public, boosting ESC purchases in new vehicles from 15% to 69% in under two years. Now, 93% of new cars in Sweden are purchased with ESC. Sweden has the safest roads in the world. Denmark and Germany have achieved similar high rates of ESC use without legislation.

#### Insurers

Auto insurers ought to be enthusiastic about ESC. However, the Canadian insurance industry is doing virtually nothing to recognize or promote ESC.

Early birds could gain a competitive advantage and win market share by discounting insurance premiums for owners of ESC-equipped vehicles. Farmer's Group, a large US insurer introduced a 5% discount for ESC users in Wisconsin.

Insurers could win moral support by progressively promoting ESC. They could also profit by reducing insured risks. Canadian insurers typically offer premium discounts for anti-theft devices. Yet none offer discounts for ESC.

The Insurance Bureau of Canada (IBC) provides crash loss rating information to help auto insurers set premiums. However, IBC has not been issuing crash loss data showing the positive effects of ESC and Canadian insurers are currently overcharging motorists who buy optional ESC and undercharging those who do not.

The US Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) took a leading role by conducting impressive ESC studies. The results have been widely circulated and are published, with videos, on the IIHS web site ([www.hwysafety.org](http://www.hwysafety.org)). IIHS gained further attention by refusing to name any vehicle without ESC as a Top Safety Pick.

The Insurance Corporation of British Columbia (ICBC) had not even heard of ESC until the author told them about it. ICBC adamantly refuses to tell its customers about ESC in insurance renewal notices.

Canadian Direct Insurance refuses to promote ESC and refuses to correct an error on its website declaring anti-lock braking systems (ABS) to be the most significant safety development since the seatbelt. (In fact, ABS brakes have not significantly reduced crashes.)

#### Media

The automotive press has written extensively on ESC, calling it the greatest safety innovation since the seatbelt and making car buffs well aware of it. The mainstream press was late recognizing ESC, but is now starting to mention it.

Every Canadian soldier killed in Afghanistan made national headlines. CBC devoted a special web page to some 80 Canadians killed there. Yet in the same time period, the deaths of some 15,000 Canadians on our highways have gone largely un-noticed. As Joseph Stalin said, "One death is a tragedy; a million is a statistic."

Media attention affects political action. For example, in British Columbia, a playful tiger recently killed its owner by swiping at her flowing skirt and slashing an artery. The media widely reported the event. The tiger was taken from its cage and slaughtered for autopsy to try to discover what caused the tiger to behave like a feline. British Columbia Cabinet Minister Pat Bell gained media coverage by announcing that he would invoke legislation curbing exotic pets. Yet Minister Bell refuses to promote awareness of ESC.

#### Safety Organizations

Safety organizations have a checkered response to ESC. Many are uninformed. Most are doing little to raise public awareness.

The Canadian Automobile Association (CAA) proclaims, "The safety of Canadian motorists has always been a top priority for CAA." Most CAA member clubs only learned about ESC when the author phoned them. CAA's policy statement promotes seat belts, air bags, and child car seats but not ESC. CAA plans to update it. CAA expects to receive some funding from the European Choose ESC organization to promote ESC awareness in Canada.

BCAA and CAA-Quebec have published several excellent articles on ESC. BCAA plans to update its Traffic Safety Foundation web site to include ESC. BCAA's insurance division (like other insurers) does not offer ESC information or discounts to its customers.

Transport Canada and the Wildlife Collision Prevention Program now have ESC information on their websites. Transport Canada recently gained considerable attention with a second website containing an ESC video. Unfortunately, few consumers view these web pages before buying vehicles.

Transport Canada has studied ESC, including a poll showing that ESC awareness is extremely low in Canada. Transport Canada also invited support from road safety organizations and industry. However, little tangible support has been forthcoming.

Workers Compensation Boards have taken no action on ESC, saying that they are confined to enforcing existing regulations. They generally disclaim responsibility for workers who crash while driving to and from work because they are not injured on the job site.

The RCMP runs Canada Road Safety Week each May with the stated objective to raise awareness of safe driving and Vision 2010, whose goal is "to make Canada's roads the safest in the world." However, Vision 2010 is expected to fail, in part because it will not take advantage of ESC as Sweden has done.

RCMP crash investigators are wary of ESC, calling it new technology without a proven track record. The RCMP's National Traffic Coordinator says the RCMP's role is enforcement and refuses to endorse ESC because it is a "consumer product."

Ironically, the RCMP endorses other consumer products such as seat belts, winter tires, and anti-lock braking systems.

Seat belts were first patented 120 years ago and in 1964, the Australian State of Victoria passed the world's first seat belt law. In 2004, the Chief Coroner of Victoria identified ESC as an important tool to prevent crashes and called for manufacturers to make ESC standard. He convinced Premier Brumby to mandate ESC, and the Premier persuaded all the other Australian states to join in. Coroners in Canada were generally unaware of ESC until the author informed them and none of them have yet highlighted the role of ESC in preventing fatalities.

ESC changed the way Consumers Union rates vehicles. The editor of Consumer Reports declared, "ESC is the most important advance in auto safety since the safety belt. ESC can help keep a vehicle out of an accident and could save more than 10,000 lives a year [in the US]. We applaud NHTSA for taking the first step." CU also joined the IIHS in disqualifying vehicles without ESC from their Top Safety Pick Awards.

Canada Safety Council, Canadian Council of Motor Transport Administrators, BC Safety Council, BC Forest Safety Council, Canadian Automobile Association -Quebec, BC Automobile Association, Consumers Union, RoadHealth Coalition, Canadian

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Association of Road Safety Professionals, and now, CanadianDriver have published articles promoting awareness of ESC.

The most organized promotion of ESC emanates from the Federation International de l'Automobile (FIA). Chairman, Max Mosely (a retired race car driver) is raising awareness of ESC through the CHOOSE ESC! campaign. Ironically, Mr. Mosely notes that Europe has fallen behind the United States even though ESC was invented in Europe.

#### What's next?

There is a lot of talk about ESC among auto buffs and stakeholders. The automotive press now routinely mentions ESC in car reviews. However, ESC awareness has not penetrated the consciousness of the average Canadian consumer, who thinks auto safety means crashing with air bags. Until consumers understand active crash avoidance technology, or until the law changes, auto dealers will continue to sell new vehicles without ESC that will still be on our highways 15-25 years in the future.

Ultimate responsibility for ESC starts with you, the consumer. You are safer with ESC in your car. You are also safer with ESC in other cars. You need to demand ESC. Yet, if you tell your friends and family about ESC, you may get an argument:

Some people don't want a computer controlling their car. However, computers are already controlling hundreds of functions in our cars. And the ESC warning light indicates when traction is poor, helping sensible drivers know when to slow down.

Many people think they are such good drivers that they don't need ESC. However, to perform like ESC, the driver would need four feet, four brake pedals, and a superhuman reaction times.

Others argue that safety starts with driver behaviour. This is true. The first driver behaviour should be to choose a vehicle equipped with ESC.

Some think ESC will make drivers too complacent or reliant on ESC. However, ESC, like any handling tool, gives drivers a chance to recover from inevitable human errors and unavoidable emergencies.

Ontario Provincial Police Commissioner Julian Fantino recently called for legislation that would make it an automatic offence for anyone who loses control and drives off the road during bad weather. He said, "The mere fact that weather conditions were bad, road conditions were bad...you've got hundreds of people driving by that same spot that don't crash and are driving carefully and the odd individual is going too fast, loses control and crashes . . . there should be a sanction for that."

The author disagrees with Commissioner Fantino. Good drivers make human mistakes. Careful drivers encounter unexpected hazards such as wildlife or other vehicles out of control. Driving is a complex task. Some drivers have diminished skills due to fatigue, age, or inexperience. ESC, like other safety equipment, gives all drivers a second chance to avoid or survive a crash.

Claes Tingvall, Director of the Swedish Road Administration and Chairman of the European New Car Assessment Program (EuroNCAP) says it is wrong to blame highway victims. In his Vision Zero statement, Dr. Tingvall says, "...the road transport system and its stakeholders have been given the task of providing the citizen with mobility but have at the same time unintentionally generated one of the largest health catastrophes ever seen in the history of mankind. In a moral and legal sense, there has always been a citizen to blame."

Responsibility for ESC is too important to be left solely to Transport Canada. It is, first and foremost, a health issue. ESC should be a major tool in reducing the adverse effects of road crashes on our health and health care system. As well, governments, bureaucrats, industries, and safety organizations involved with labour, workers compensation, auto insurance, police, the courts, and the environment should all take advantage of ESC as an opportunity to save lives and money and prevent debilitating injuries.

The obvious strategies are to:

- Promote awareness of ESC, like anti-smoking campaigns;
- Create ESC incentives through insurance and sales tax discounts; and
- Mandate ESC by law.

One day we will wonder how we drove without ESC.

#### References and links

Videos demonstrating ESC in action are available on Youtube or at these web sites:

Passenger Vehicles: - [youtube.com](#)

Dry pavement: - [whatcar.com](#)

Snow & Ice: - [youtube.com](#)

Trucks and Buses: - [youtube.com](#)

Four Little Words: - [HowSafeIsYourCar.com](#)

ESC is the generic name for Electronic Stability Control but it is easily confused with other features such as ABS or traction control that are not the same. (See the Snow & Ice video above.) Wikipedia publishes extensive information on ESC and lists various different trade names of ESC so you will know how to correctly ask for ESC: [Wikipedia](#)

The IIHS lists vehicle models sold in the US with ESC: [IIHS](#)

CHOOSE ESC!, IIHS, NHTSA, and Transport Canada have ESC websites:

[CHOOSE ESC!](#)

[IIHS](#)

[NHTSA](#)

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Glen Nicholson is a lawyer in Prince George, British Columbia. He is an independent safety advocate, promoting ESC awareness for free because he believes it will save many lives. He has no financial interest in ESC.

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