After years of steady, gradual declines in the number of traffic fatalities, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has announced a 9.3 percent increase in the number of U.S. traffic deaths in the first nine months of 2015. Though the actual amounts for the final quarter and the whole of 2015 won’t be out until later this spring, the preliminary numbers show a marked increase, with a projected 26,000 fatalities from January to September of 2015, compared to 23,796 for the same period of 2014.

A number of factors may have led to the increase in fatalities. For example, lower fuel prices seem to have induced Americans to spend more time on the road. Preliminary figures from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) show an increase in vehicle miles traveled (VMT) of 80.2 billion miles—a 3.5 percent increase over the same period last year.

Additionally, vehicles themselves have been experiencing a number of safety issues. Over the course of the last year, auto manufacturers and government regulators have identified major safety concerns—like malfunctioning Takata airbags and the General Motors ignition switch scandal—leading to recalls of millions of unsafe cars that are currently on the road.

NHTSA has taken the data as an indication that the agency needs to do more to prevent crashes. In fact, citing the fact that human factors contribute to 94 percent of crashes, NHTSA has said that it has already begun a series of regional summits to examine unsafe driver behaviors that contribute to fatalities.
Court Ruling Could Expand OSHA’s Regulatory Reach

According to an administrative law judge (ALJ), OSHA may have the authority to impose enterprise-wide abatement measures against companies who have violated safety standards, even at sites other than those where OSHA inspectors have issued citations. Despite the ruling, though, experts caution that the ALJ’s decision will likely be appealed.

The ruling comes in a case involving a dispute between OSHA and a Michigan-based transportation company. In November 2014, OSHA cited the company for 14 violations of workplace health and safety standards at its Billerica, Massachusetts shipping terminal. The company filed a notice of contest, resulting in the ensuing litigation. OSHA alleged that the company not only violated safety and health standards at the inspected worksite, but at other worksites as well, and demanded that the company comply with the applicable safety standards at all of its locations. The company filed a motion, alleging that OSHA didn’t have the authority to enforce enterprise-wide abatement.

The ALJ denied the motion, effectively saying that OSHA can enforce the standards, even at worksites other than those inspected. The ruling allows OSHA to proceed to the discovery stage and present evidence that enterprise-wide abatement is justified.

White House Asks Congress for $1.8 Billion to Combat Zika

The White House has announced that it will be seeking $1.8 billion from Congress to help combat the spread of the Zika virus both in the United States and abroad. A number of U.S. citizens have contracted the virus while traveling abroad, but government officials have cautioned the public not to panic. Zika only produces symptoms in about 1 in 5 people, and they’re generally mild, like headaches, rashes and muscle pain. Pregnant women, however, have been urged to take extra caution, as contraction of the virus could result in an increased risk of microcephaly—a serious condition that results in children being born with abnormally small heads.

Agencies Investigate Crumb Rubber Turf

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) announced last month that they would be joining forces to investigate the potential health risks posed by artificial crumb turf made from recycled tires.

In recent years, crumb rubber turf has become an increasingly popular choice for playgrounds and school athletic fields—it combines the feeling of natural grass with the low maintenance and durability of an artificial playing surface. However, some parents and safety advocates worry that the unknown components of recycled crumb rubber turf could be posing health risks to young athletes.

So far, a handful of tests have been conducted, and none have shown a link between crumb rubber turf and adverse health risks. However, determining whether something poses a carcinogenic risk takes time and resources. Because the surface is relatively new, no one has had the chance to conduct more widespread or longitudinal studies.

Both advocates and critics of crumb rubber turf welcome the agencies’ efforts, hoping that a governmental investigation will settle the question, one way or the other.