

EDITORIAL – Automakers urge Governments to make conditions favourable for autonomous vehicle testing

02-May-2016 13:05 GMT

S&P Global

Supply Chain and Technology, Automotive

UK provides funding and support as Volvo announces testing program

Volvo Cars has announced that it is to begin an autonomous driving test programme next year which it has described as the "most ambitious" currently underway. The programme, called 'Drive Me London', will begin in early 2017 with "semi-autonomous driving cars" and will expand to 100 cars by 2018. This will make it "the largest and most extensive AD (Autonomous Driving) testing programme on Britain's streets", according to Volvo. Thatcham Research will also provide technical data analysis and any professional test drivers needed as part of the trial. Unlike many of the test programmes that are currently under way in the country, Volvo intends to use "real families driving AD cars on public roads." It already has plans to conduct similar tests in Sweden and China.



The programme follows the announcement of provisions by the UK Government to support the development of autonomous driving technology. Under the Highways England Innovation Strategy, plans were revealed to carry out trials of driverless cars on the road network in the country from 2017, while launching a consultation to reduce regulatory barriers during mid-2016. It will also establish a "connected corridor" between London and Dover (both United Kingdom) to "enable vehicles to communicate wirelessly with infrastructure" which will be funded with GBP15 million (USD21.2 million). A trial of truck platooning is also planned on "strategic roads."

With autonomous driving technologies set to be one of the big automotive technology trends during the next few years, the United Kingdom is aiming to become one of the leaders in this area. Light vehicle sales and production have been growing strongly in the country recently, and the government is looking to make conditions favourable for the industry to continue to grow there. It is also supporting a number of projects experimenting with the technology around the country. The announcement with regards truck platooning follows other recent reports that the Department for Transport has already indicated tests of this technology that it will trial vehicle platooning.

In addition to this, there have been a number of European automakers looking for support from the European Union for a legislative framework to support the use of autonomous. The comments and initiatives coincided with an informal summit of EU transport ministers in Amsterdam in April.

In a statement published by Jaguar Land Rover (JLR), its director of Research and Technology, Wolfgang Epple said, "To successfully deliver these technologies industry needs a common approach between carmakers, mobile telecom providers and providers of roadside infrastructure systems... This will allow standardisation and harmonisation, enabling cars to communicate with each other and the roadside infrastructure around them efficiently and effectively. It allows Jaguar Land Rover to deliver technologies that are relevant, accessible and affordable to customers."

These sentiments of looking towards standardization and frameworks for AD development are echoed in the US, where Google and General Motors have urged US policymakers to draft uniform autonomous vehicle regulations. In testimonies submitted to the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, the companies warned that different sets of regulations in separate states are likely to hinder development of the technology.

"The worst possible scenario for the growth of autonomous vehicles is an inconsistent and conflicting patchwork of local, municipal and county laws," said Joseph Okpaku, GM's vice-president of government relations. Google, which has been a pioneer in the field, despite being an

outsider, sounded a similar opinion.

"If every state is left to go its own way without a unified approach, operating self-driving cars across state boundaries would be an unworkable situation and one that will significantly hinder safety innovation, interstate commerce, national competitiveness and the eventual deployment of autonomous vehicles," said Chris Urmson, Google's director of self-driving cars.

While automakers and suppliers are keen to bring their self-driving systems to market, regulators have fallen behind in framing policies including identifying responsibilities in the event of an accident. Questions are also being raised over whether the current systems are ready for widespread deployment.

"In my opinion, the self-driving car community is woefully deficient in its testing and evaluation programmes... with no leadership that notionally should be provided by [the] NHTSA [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration]," said Mary Cummings, director of Duke University Humans and Autonomy Laboratory, in its testimony.

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