

# Steve Kenner outlines safety overhaul for GM's Cruise

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August 5, 2024



August 05, 2024 11:48 AM updated 17 hours ago

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Steve Kenner, Cruise's chief safety officer, addresses an audience at the Automated Road Transportation Symposium in San Diego on July 30, 2024.

**SAN DIEGO** — General Motors subsidiary Cruise intends to transform its troubled self-driving system into a "role model driver."

That's one goal of an ongoing overhaul that comes as Cruise reckons with its safety culture and plots an eventual return to commercial robotaxi service, according to Steve Kenner, the company's new chief safety officer.

"We're holding ourselves to a bar of 'role model driver,' and not just a 'better-than-average driver,'" he told Automotive News.

The reset comes as Cruise regroups from an October 2023 crash that seriously injured a pedestrian and jeopardized the company's future.

GM's Cruise targets resumption of driverless rides this year

Cruise shut down its nationwide fleet in the aftermath, laid off nearly 1,000 employees and replaced its senior management. It resumed testing, with human safety drivers aboard, in three U.S. cities in May.

"Cruise is a different company today than it was last fall," said Kenner, a longtime safety executive at tech and auto companies who joined Cruise in February.

His remarks — the first public comments of his tenure — came July 30 at the Automated Road Transportation Symposium, an annual meeting of business leaders, government officials and researchers focused on self-driving technology.

#### NADA Taps Future Energy's Dan Young as Expert Speaker on Vehicle Electrification

Automotive executives are predicting a sweeping transformation of the automotive sector in the next five to 10 years, according to a 2021 study by KPMG.

Safety was the prime focus of the gathering as the industry deals with mishaps. Federal safety regulators are conducting ongoing investigations into Cruise, Waymo and Zoox. Moreover, surveys indicate nearly two-thirds of consumers do not trust autonomous vehicles. [read more](#)

With a prevailing concern that further incidents could hinder the industry's commercialization, many at the conference said they were encouraged by Cruise's efforts to improve safety.

"I'm hopeful for what's happening at Cruise," said Jeffrey Wishart, an engineering professor at Arizona State University and vice president of innovation at the Arizona Commerce Authority. He has helped establish best practices and standards related to automated driving.

"Steve is bringing in this new culture, and part of this whole thing is safety culture," Wishart said.

#### Measuring operational 'brittleness'

Cruise is establishing specific benchmarks that underpin the "role model" aspiration, Kenner said. Those benchmarks will apply to multiple driving scenarios, such as left turns or certain areas of a city, where the company can make apples-to-apples comparisons. That will allow the company to measure driving improvements.

Separately, the company will track metrics that measure what it calls "brittleness," the frequency of times cars become stranded or cluster because of blocked roads along routes.

Cruise wants to avoid situations where one hiccup leads to a cascading series of complicated problems, such as the clustering incidents in which Cruise cars became immobilized at San Francisco intersections, sometimes for hours, last year.

"We have a metric that measures the brittleness of our routes now, and we monitor that," Kenner said.

#### Third-party review

Cruise is testing its self-driving Chevrolet Bolt autonomous vehicles in Dallas, Houston and Phoenix. The company has not said when or where it will resume commercial, driverless service.

In any service resumption, Cruise wants to avoid the contentious relationships with city officials and first responders that became a hallmark of its previous commercial deployment in San Francisco.

"We are launching with cities and communities, not at them," he said. "Our approach has now placed additional and renewed emphasis on building trust."

As part of that effort, Cruise will hire an independent evaluator to conduct a safety review before it takes human backup drivers out of the cars, Kenner said. It will be similar to the independent safety audit that self-driving truck company Aurora unveiled July 30, he said.

"Yes, I want to have a third party engaged in the assessment of our safety case," Kenner said. "I do think in terms of building trust and confidence. That's important."

#### Examining operations

Cruise also will become a founding member of a new research collaborative led by Mitre, a federally funded firm that brings together government, academic and industry interests to research and vet technology.

Mitre has decades of experience working in defense and aviation. The new collaborative will explore the role of operations centers and remote operations in managing fleets of automated road vehicles, Kenner said.

Previously, Kenner worked in safety-focused jobs at Kodiak Robotics, Apple, Locomotion and Aurora. His arrival at Cruise marks something of a homecoming — he started his career at General Motors in 1978. Now he's eager for the formidable task ahead.

"I'm absolutely excited and passionate about fixing Cruise," he said. "And I also know by doing that, I'm going to help the AV industry. I sincerely believe in the promise and safety potential of autonomous vehicles, and I want to help realize that potential."

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