

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

LEGAL UPDATES

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Service

Autonomous Vehicles

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NHTSA Grants First-Ever U.S. Exemption for Purpose-Built Robotaxi Fleet: Key Takeaways for the AV Industry

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has granted Amazon's Zoox Inc. a landmark exemption for its U.S.-manufactured, purpose-built autonomous vehicles (AVs). This decision allows Zoox to deploy robotaxis **without steering wheels or pedals** for research and demonstration use on public roads. NHTSA explains this approval process as an example of "successfully promoting U.S. technology and safety through simpler, faster exemption procedures that allow companies to operate noncompliant vehicles on U.S. roads."

NHTSA closed its probe into Zoox's earlier self-certification after Zoox agreed to remove all claims that its vehicles fully complied with Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS). All Zoox vehicles now operate under this new exemption. Zoox also responded to recent safety incidents by recalling vehicles, pausing operations, and issuing software updates—actions that satisfied NHTSA's expectations.

Recent U.S. Department of Transportation policy changes have accelerated approvals for U.S.-built AVs, aiming to "drive the future of self-driving cars forward." Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy stated, "This is a win-win for safety and innovation...U.S. companies like Zoox have a process to create and test their latest technologies."

Zoox plans to ramp up production at its California facility, targeting up to 10,000 robotaxis per year, with launches planned for Las Vegas, Austin, Miami, and San Francisco.

Key takeaways for the AV sector

Regulatory breakthrough: NHTSA's exemption gives U.S. AV manufacturers new flexibility to deploy innovative, fully autonomous vehicles.

Proactive safety response: Zoox's swift recalls and software updates underscore the importance of transparent, timely regulatory engagement.

Changing safety standards: NHTSA's decision reflects a shift in how regulators evaluate vehicles built exclusively for autonomy.

Industry impact: Large-scale robotaxi deployment will reshape mobility, infrastructure, and compliance strategies.

Federal momentum: The administration's streamlined approach signals ongoing federal support for AV innovation and deployment.

Contact us

As AV regulations evolve, companies must prioritize safety, regulatory cooperation, and clear communication. Husch Blackwell stands ready to advise clients on compliance, risk, and strategy in this dynamic sector. If you have questions about the NHTSA exemption process or other AV-related questions, contact Julie Maurer, Jamie Steiner, Andy Kleiner, or your Husch Blackwell attorney.