

The New York Times **A Bumpy Ride for San Francisco’s Driverless Taxis**

Autonomous vehicles scored a victory this month when state regulators approved their expansion in the city, but then the mishaps kept coming.

By Yiwen Lu August 22nd, 2023

After California regulators approved the expansion of driverless taxi services in San Francisco earlier this month, it took only a little more than 24 hours for a series of events to begin that seemed to justify the taxis’ detractors.

The day after the vote, 10 autonomous vehicles operated by Cruise, a subsidiary of General Motors, abruptly stopped functioning in the middle of a busy street in the North Beach neighborhood of San Francisco. Posts to social media showed the cars jammed up, their hazard lights flashing, blocking traffic for 15 minutes.

And then last week, a Cruise car collided with a fire truck in the city, injuring a passenger in the car.

So it was that last Friday Cruise agreed to a request from the California Department of Motor Vehicles to cut in half the number of vehicles it operated in San Francisco, even though regulatory approval for more remained in place. The company, which has had 400 driverless vehicles operating in the city, will now have no more than 50 cars running during the day and 150 at night.

Drew Pusateri, a spokesman for Cruise, said in a statement over the weekend that Cruise “positively impacts overall road safety” compared with other vehicles on the roads and their injury and fatality rates. He said the company would provide state officials with “any data they need to reinforce the safety and efficiency of our fleet.”

But to many San Francisco officials, activists and residents, the recent episodes made clear that the cars can be a danger.

When Cruise pitched their cars to regulators in December, road safety was a crucial component of their argument. Unlike some human drivers, the artificial intelligence running the vehicles abides by speed limits and doesn’t get distracted, the companies maintained. The two companies have said that in their first million miles of fully autonomous driving, there were no fatalities or life-threatening injuries.

City agencies, however, have repeatedly raised concerns about the potential for the vehicles to impede emergency responders. Officials have documented dozens of incidents in which a driverless car interfered with emergency vehicles, including one instance when firefighters were battling a house fire. That kind of obstruction could be a matter of life and death, according to the chief of the San Francisco Fire Department, Jeanine Nicholson.

Public transportation and bicycle proponents have protested adding more vehicles to the city’s streets. And San Francisco taxi drivers are concerned that the technology will replace their jobs, while passengers will no longer be able to rely on a driver for help with luggage and groceries, or getting in and out of the car.

Cruise will operate at reduced capacity at least until the D.M.V. completes an investigation of the vehicles’ safety. In the meantime, the debate will go on.

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