Ford’s new driver-assist system isn’t Autopilot, but it’s a step in the right direction

Ford announced a raft of new driver-assistance features today, promising to make automatic emergency braking and other safety technology standard on many of its vehicles. The automaker stopped short of trying to look as if it would compete with semi-autonomous systems like Tesla’s Autopilot, but it’s a sign that improved safety technology will be coming to many more vehicles in the near future.

Ford has rolled out a number of new driver-assistance features piecemeal over the years, but now is repackaging five of them together under a new name: Ford Co-Pilot 360. The new system includes automatic emergency braking, blind spot monitors, backup cameras, lane keep assist, and auto high beams. A more premium version that includes adaptive cruise control with lane centering, evasive steering assist and post-collision braking, will be available as an option to those willing to pay more money for more advanced technology.

Meet Ford Co-Pilot 360
Co-Pilot 360, which relies on forward- and rear-facing cameras and radar to watch out for pedestrians and monitor blindspots, will be standard on all Ford vehicles by 2020. It’ll be added over the next couple of years as models are updated, starting with the revamped 2019 Edge SUV this fall. The automaker announced the new system as part of a product-themed event in Dearborn, Michigan, during which Ford laid out its ambitious plans to boost its production of hybrid vehicles and replace three-quarters of its lineup in two years.

The commitment to make automatic emergency braking standard on all of its new vehicles is noteworthy. Few automakers have shown a willingness to uphold a pledge made to the Obama administration to voluntarily equip all of their passenger vehicles with automatic emergency braking by 2022, Ford among them. To date, the Blue Oval has only fitted the device to less than 10 percent of its fleet, according to the *Detroit News*. Today's announcement indicates that Ford plans to boost that number.

With Co-Pilot 360, Ford appears to be interested in competing with brands like Cadillac, Nissan, Mercedes-Benz, and Tesla, all of which have vehicles on the market today with highly automated driver assistance systems. Tesla's Autopilot and Cadillac's Super Cruise, specifically, have set the standard in semi-autonomous features, but both are available only in pricey luxury vehicles. To what extent Ford can make its high-tech driving systems available to more mass market customers remains to be seen. Some were quick to note that the automaker's branding of the new safety system was confusing.

Others noted that it was a positive step by one of the biggest automakers in the world. "While I would like to see them include adaptive cruise control as standard as well, it's certainly a step in the right direction," said Sam Abuelsamid, senior analyst at Navigant Research, "and ACC will be offered as an option along with more capable lane centering systems."

Semi-autonomous systems like Autopilot and Super Cruise are often dismissed as glorified versions of cruise control, but they're also a canary in the coal mine when it comes to full

autonomy. As more and more cars are sold with these advanced features, drivers get more experience with letting go of the wheel and trusting their cars to handle some of the driving. And soon enough, they may feel comfortable enough to relinquish all control, which is where a lot of car and tech companies think we're headed.

Car consumers are certainly attracted to more high-tech systems, especially if they can promise a safer, more stress-free driving experience. A survey conducted by Edmunds in late 2017 found that 58 percent of car shoppers would pay an extra $1,000 or more for a vehicle equipped with active safety features.

"Active safety features are the gateway to consumer acceptance of autonomous technology," said Edmunds' Jeremy Acevedo. "Ford has taken a fair amount of criticism for lagging behind in the autonomous race, and making more of these features standard across its full model line is a big step in the right direction."

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