

# Toyota trying to move beyond safety concerns

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(AP) -- Toyota Motor Corp., which built its reputation in the U.S. on safety and reliability, has been cleared by the government of electronic problems in its vehicles. Now it needs to convince consumers that it has put its safety recalls in the rear view mirror.

The Transportation Department said Tuesday that electronic flaws were not to blame for reports of sudden, unintended acceleration. Since 2009, Toyota has recalled more than 12 million vehicles globally over safety problems. The government's new findings bolstered Toyota's contention that the company had directly dealt with the problems through its recalls and is making safety paramount in its lineup.

Analysts said it would take more than a government report to repair Toyota's once pristine image for producing quality vehicles. Toyota was the only major automaker to see a U.S. sales decline last year at 0.4 percent and saw its U.S. market share fall nearly 2 percentage points to 15.2 percent. The decline came even though total U.S. sales rose 11 percent for the year.

"This is really something that is going to take years and years to recover," said Rebecca Lindland, director of [automotive research](#) with consulting firm IHS Automotive.

Toyota has wrestled with recalls to fix sticking accelerator pedals, gas pedals that became trapped in floor mats and other safety issues, forcing the world's No. 1 automaker to scramble to protect its reputation. Toyota paid the U.S. government a record \$48.8 million in fines for its handling

of three recalls.

Toyota said the government report should "further reinforce confidence in the safety of Toyota and Lexus vehicles" and "put to rest unsupported speculation" about the company's electronic throttle control systems, which are "well-designed and well-tested to ensure that a real world, uncommanded acceleration of the [vehicle](#) cannot occur." The company said it was "focused on listening to our customers and constantly improving our products and service."

Transportation officials, helped by NASA engineers, said the 10-month study of Toyota vehicles concluded the acceleration cases could have been caused by mechanical defects already covered by recalls and suggested in some cases drivers hit the gas when they intended to press the brakes. The study, launched at the request of Congress, responded to consumer complaints that flawed electronics could be the culprit behind incidents that led to Toyota's spate of recalls.

The automaker faces hundreds of lawsuits over alleged unwanted acceleration. Some consumer groups said the study was limited in its reach, and they would continue to press the company over safety. "We don't think the story's over - not by a long shot," said Sean Kane, founder of Safety Research & Strategies Inc., a Massachusetts-based firm that has studied Toyota's recalls.

Steve Berman, an attorney for plaintiffs in a class-action lawsuit against Toyota, said the report's findings were "in stark contrast to what Toyota drivers across the country experienced - and continue to experience - even after the series of recalls." He said there were too many reports of unwanted acceleration in vehicles fixed under the recall to eliminate electronics.

Other [automakers](#) have faced similar problems in the past. Audi dealt

with a spate of unintended acceleration problems with its 5000 sedan in the late 1980s. The [car](#) was recalled after complaints that it would suddenly accelerate when shifted from park to drive or reverse. NHTSA found that most of the incidents were caused by drivers putting their feet on the wrong pedals.

Audi's U.S. sales bottomed out in 1991 at just over 12,000 vehicles, but the German automaker has made strides with sporty luxury vehicles. Last year the company sold 101,629 vehicles nationwide, according to Ward's AutoInfoBank.

David Champion, senior director of auto testing for Consumer Reports magazine, said questions about Toyota's reliability first started to surface in the magazine's annual subscriber survey in 2007. In last year's survey, Champion said, Toyota had some vehicles drop to below average in reliability for the first time in decades.

"I do think they lost direction in some ways," Champion said. "It'll be interesting to see how they change direction and go back to what they're good at: building somewhat boring in some ways but very efficient and very reliable sedans that people want to buy."

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