

# Congress: Safety agency mishandled GM recall

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This April 1, 2014 file photo shows David Friedman, the acting head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, as he testified on Capitol Hill in Washington, before the House Energy and Commerce subcommittee on Oversight and Investigation. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration should have discovered General Motors' faulty ignition switches seven years before the company recalled 2.6 million cars to fix the deadly problem, a House committee majority charged Tuesday in a new report. (AP Photo/Evan Vucci)

Both houses of Congress scolded the U.S. highway safety agency Tuesday over its tardy handling of a deadly problem with General Motors cars, questioning whether it is competent to guarantee the safety of increasingly complex vehicles.

David Friedman, acting chief of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, repeatedly defended his agency during a Senate hearing as lawmakers accused him of failing to take responsibility for missing multiple clues that could have saved lives in the recall of GM small cars with faulty ignition switches.

Sen. Claire McCaskill, a Democrat, chastised Friedman, saying that consumers had to take it upon themselves to point out engine stalling problems with GM cars, and a Wisconsin state trooper investigating a fatal accident told NHTSA of trouble with defective GM ignitions. Yet for years, the agency took no action.

"Why can't you take responsibility?" she said. "You have got to take some responsibility that this isn't being handled correctly for the American driving public."

Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Connecticut, went even further, saying NHTSA failed to meet its obligations to protect people. "You are the face of that failure," he said.

The action came on a rough day for the beleaguered agency. On Tuesday morning, majority Republicans on the House Energy and Commerce Committee released a report saying NHTSA should have discovered GM's faulty ignition switches in 2007, seven years before the company recalled 2.6 million cars to fix the deadly problem. They also said the agency didn't understand how air bags worked, lacked accountability and

failed to share information internally.

"As vehicle functions and safety systems become increasingly complex and interconnected, NHTSA needs to keep pace with these rapid advancements in technology," the report said. "As evidenced by the GM recall, this may be a greater challenge than even NHTSA understands."

At least 19 people died in crashes caused by the faulty switches in GM small cars like the Chevrolet Cobalt. The company acknowledged knowing about the problem for at least a decade, but it didn't recall the cars until February. The delays left the problem on the roads, causing numerous crashes that resulted in deaths and injuries. Lawmakers have said they expect the death toll to rise to near 100.

NHTSA already has fined GM the maximum \$35 million for failing to report information on the switches, but the committee found that many of the bureaucratic snafus that plagued GM also are present at NHTSA.

"While NHTSA now complains about GM's switch, it seems NHTSA was asleep at the switch too," Rep. Tim Murphy, a Republican, said in a statement.

Under questioning in the Senate, Friedman conceded that the agency needed to make improvements, including more aggressive follow-up on crashes that could have causes different from the agency's initial findings.

But he also said the auto industry has more information and people than NHTSA. The agency, he said, needs bigger fines to deter automakers from hiding safety problems, and it needs more staff and updated technology to track problems.

Friedman has been the agency's acting chief since December. Senators

called on the White House to name a permanent chief of NHTSA, saying it will be hard for an interim chief to lead reforms.

Senators questioned why NHTSA didn't pursue consumer reports of GM cars stalling while moving. "For the ordinary consumer, a car stalling repeatedly on a highway or anywhere is a problem," said Sen. Richard Blumenthal, a Democrat.

Friedman responded that stalling is a serious safety problem. Elaborating to reporters later, he said past complaints about stalls where consumers could pull over the side of the road, restart the [car](#) and pull back into traffic were judged not to be an "unreasonable risk to safety."

Since the GM recalls, Friedman said he has met with 12 major automakers at the agency's headquarters to emphasize that there will be "zero tolerance" for withholding safety information.

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