

US turns up heat on Takata over air bag problem (Update)

October 30 2014, by Tom Krisher

U.S. safety regulators are ordering Japanese auto supplier Takata Corp. to provide more information about air bags that can explode and shoot shrapnel toward drivers and passengers.

The order sent Thursday makes 36 separate requests for information on production mistakes, lawsuit settlements and reports of deaths or injuries that the Tokyo-based company has received. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration also wants to know how many replacement parts Takata can make each day and what it has discussed with automakers and competitors.

Takata has until Dec. 1 to turn in the information or it could face fines of \$7,000 per day. A Takata spokesman said the company is cooperating and will work to meet the agency's requests.

Ten automakers have recalled nearly 8 million vehicles in the U.S.—and 12 million worldwide—equipped with potentially faulty Takata air bag inflators. Safety advocates say the problem has caused four deaths in the U.S.

Honda has been hit hardest, with about 5 million cars called back to repair their air bags. Other affected automakers include Nissan, Chrysler, Ford, Mazda, Subaru, Mitsubishi, Toyota, BMW and General Motors. Lawmakers say that 30 million cars with potentially faulty Takata air bags are driving on U.S. roads.

Takata, the world's second-largest air bag maker with 22 percent of the market, has been plagued by problems with its air bags since at least 2001. That year, Japanese automaker Isuzu reported an exploding air bag in the Isuzu Rodeo and Honda Passport, and quietly recalled three affected vehicles, according to a class action lawsuit against Takata and automakers that was filed this week in Florida.

Takata has given various explanations for the issue, including humid conditions at its factory in Mexico; improper welds; trouble with stamping equipment; and an improper amount of generant, which produces the gas that makes air bags inflate.

So far, NHTSA has allowed automakers to limit their air bag recalls to certain high-humidity areas, including Florida, Puerto Rico and Hawaii. Takata and federal regulators are still investigating, but NHTSA has no data showing the problem has happened outside high humidity areas.

But some lawmakers and others have been pressuring NHTSA to do more. The agency is also still smarting from a bungled recall of General Motors' vehicles for faulty ignition switches. In that case, congressional inquiries found that agency staff missed key information and allowed the switch problems to go uncorrected for 11 years.

Thursday's order is similar to one regulators sent to GM in March seeking more information about its ignition switch recalls. That order asked 107 questions and gave GM a month to submit photos, memos, electronic communications and engineering drawings.

GM missed the deadline and was fined \$7,000 per day—or a total of \$420,000—until it finally submitted all the information in June.

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