

Senators get no clear answers on air bag safety

November 20 2014, by Tom Krisher



Hiroshi Shimizu, senior vice president of global quality assurance at Japanese airbag maker Takata, apologizes for the failure of the defective devices, as he testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington, Thursday, Nov. 20, 2014, before the Senate Commerce Committee hearing about the airbags linked to multiple deaths and injuries in cars driven in the US. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

There were apologies and long-winded explanations, but after nearly four hours of testimony about exploding air bags, senators never got a

clear answer to the question most people have: whether or not their cars are safe.

A hearing Thursday before the Senate Commerce Committee featured an apology from the quality chief for Japan's Takata Corp., the maker of the air bags that can inflate with too much force, firing metal shrapnel into a car's passenger compartment.

A senior Honda executive also acknowledged his company didn't comply with disclosure laws.

But an exchange between Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev., and Honda Executive Vice President Rick Schostek pretty much summed up the day.

Heller, who has an 18-year-old daughter, pointedly asked if it is safe for her to drive their 2007 Honda Civic.

After a nine-second pause, Schostek gave an answer that wasn't reassuring. He explained that some models had been recalled nationally due to a Takata manufacturing problem. Others had been recalled in an area of mainly Southern states with high humidity.

"We are trying to understand if there is any additional risk out there," he said.

Prolonged exposure to airborne moisture can cause Takata's air bag inflator propellant to burn quickly, blowing apart a metal canister and sending shrapnel into passengers. At least five people have died worldwide. Lawmakers have called for a national recall to end confusion, but most automakers have balked.

Heller pressed on. "How can you assure me that a 2007 vehicle is safe

for any young adult on the road to drive today?" he asked.



Senate Commerce Committee member Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla. displays the parts and function of a defective airbag made by Takata of Japan that has been linked to multiple deaths and injuries in cars driven in the US., Thursday, Nov. 20, 2014, during the committee's hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

Schostek wasn't sure of exact models under recall, and said Honda wants recalled vehicles to be repaired.

"If that vehicle was not subject to a recall, we have not determined risk, so we would deem it safe for the driver," he said.

That wasn't very reassuring to Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla., who presided

over the hearing.

"Perhaps on the basis of Mr. Schostek's response, you'd better tell your daughter not to drive south in her Honda," he said.

Eight million cars with Takata air bag inflators have been recalled in the U.S., and more than 12 million worldwide. Nelson said there could be as many as 100 million Takata-equipped cars globally and 30 million in the U.S.

"This could be a problem of gargantuan proportions," he said.

During questioning, Schostek acknowledged that Honda violated federal requirements to report deaths, injuries and safety defects to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.



Senate Commerce Committee member Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla. displays the parts and function of a defective airbag made by Takata of Japan that has been

linked to multiple deaths and injuries in cars driven in the US, Thursday, Nov. 20, 2014, during the committee's hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

Also Thursday, Hiroshi Shimizu, Takata's head of quality, said the Japanese parts supplier is "deeply sorry and anguished" about each instance of air bag inflators not performing as designed. He said the company accepts responsibility for three deaths, but two others are under investigation.

At every turn, senators were stymied by what they considered evasive answers from Takata, Honda and Chrysler executives. And they suggested a cover-up by Takata, which reportedly conducted secret tests of the air bags in 2004.

Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., whose Commerce subcommittee investigated the General Motors ignition-switch debacle, saw echoes of that in the air bag problem now under scrutiny.

She noted "an industry that fears no consequences from not complying with the law" and a federal regulator lacking the resources and expertise "to properly do its job."



Senate Commerce Committee member Sen. Bill Nelson, D-Fla. displays the parts and function of a defective airbag made by Takata of Japan that has been linked to multiple deaths and injuries in cars driven in the US., Thursday, Nov. 20, 2014, during the committee's hearing on Capitol Hill in Washington. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

Shimizu said he was first told in 2005 about the problems, but said Takata did not inform NHTSA at that time. Takata conducted an investigation of the defects in 2007, he testified.

His answers were insufficient to the senators. "It was a shuffle, a two-step, side-step," Nelson said.

Chrysler was criticized for its decision to wait to notify customers of the problems until it has sufficient replacement air bags—pushing it to Dec. 19. Senators pressed David Friedman, NHTSA's deputy administrator, to

order Chrysler to speed up the process.



From left, Hiroshi Shimizu, senior vice president of global quality assurance at Japanese airbag maker Takata, Rick Schostek, executive vice president of Honda North America, and Scott Kunselman, Chrysler's senior vice president of vehicle safety and regulatory compliance, take their seats on Capitol Hill in Washington, Thursday, Nov. 20, 2014, prior to testifying before the Senate Commerce Committee hearing on airbags linked to multiple deaths and injuries in cars driven in the US. (AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite)

© 2014 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Citation: Senators get no clear answers on air bag safety (2014, November 20) retrieved 31 May 2023 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-11-senators-air-bag-safety.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.