

Safety agency to push for national air bag recall (Update)

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In this Monday, Feb. 3, 2014, file photo, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) Acting Administrator David Friedman speaks in Washington. On the Tuesday, Nov. 18, 2014, the federal government demanded that the auto industry recall millions of additional cars equipped with faulty air bags that can injure—and even kill—a driver. Friedman said that if Takata and the automakers don't agree to the recall quickly, the safety agency will use its legal powers to make sure the inflators are recalled. (AP Photo/Charles Dharapak, File)

The federal government is demanding that the auto industry recall millions of additional cars equipped with faulty air bags that can injure—and even kill—a driver.

The action Tuesday by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration covers driver's side air bags equipped with inflators made by Takata Corp. of Japan. The inflators can erupt and send metal fragments into the passenger compartment.

Previously, cars with the inflators had been recalled only in regions with high humidity such as Gulf Coast states, Hawaii and Puerto Rico. Takata has said that prolonged exposure to moisture can cause the air bag propellant to burn faster than

designed, causing the problem.

Up until now, about 8 million cars in the U.S. with Takata inflators have been recalled for problems with either the driver or passenger side air bag, or both. Another 4 million have been recalled outside the U.S. At least five deaths worldwide have been linked to the problem.

Safety regulators say Tuesday's action is based on incidents involving a death in California and an injury in North Carolina where the air bags were implicated. Both states are outside of the area covered by the earlier recalls.

"One can be an anomaly. Two becomes a trend, and we feel we need to act," said NHTSA Deputy Administrator David Friedman.

Takata said in a statement that it agrees the current recall should be expanded if the investigation it's conducting with NHTSA determines there is a safety risk. But it said the current results indicate that a regional recall is appropriate. Takata said it has evaluated 1,000 driver and passenger inflators from outside the humid areas and none have ruptured.

"Takata is concerned that a national recall under these circumstances could potentially divert replacement air bags from where they're needed, putting lives at risk," the company said.



In this Thursday, April 17, 2014, file photo, journalists visit Takata Ignition Systems in Schoenebeck, Germany. On Tuesday, Nov. 18, 2014, the federal government demanded that the auto industry recall millions of additional cars equipped with faulty air bags that can injure—and even kill—a driver. The action by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration covers driver's side air bags equipped with inflators made by Takata Corp. (AP Photo/Jens Meyer)

Lawmakers have pressured the government to expand the recall to all 50 states as reports of deaths and injuries emerged. While they'll partly get their wish, the expanded recall won't cover passenger air bags, at least not yet.

Also, car owners may run into a problem: a limited number of replacement parts. Takata is struggling to make enough replacement air bag inflators to handle the smaller regional recalls and likely will have trouble supplying demand for a nationwide recall. The company has promised to add two production lines by the start of next year to make more inflators, Friedman said on a conference call following the government's recall statement.

Friedman said that if Takata and the automakers don't agree to the recall quickly, the safety agency will use its legal powers to make sure the inflators are recalled. He also said Takata resisted moving to a nationwide recall Monday evening.

Takata didn't respond to that charge in its statement, but the company said it "remains

committed to addressing all safety issues promptly."

On Thursday, lawmakers will hold a hearing to question Friedman, as well as representatives from Takata and the automakers, about their response to the air bag problem. And next week, millions of drivers across the U.S. will hop in their cars to travel for the busy Thanksgiving weekend.

The government's demand for the national recall covers vehicles made by Ford, Honda, Chrysler, Mazda and BMW, generally from the 2008 model year and earlier. The owner of a 2007 Ford Mustang recently complained to the government about suffering a leg injury when an air bag malfunctioned in North Carolina.



This undated photo provided by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety shows a crash test of a 2002 Honda CR-V, one of the models subject to a recall to repair faulty air bags. The federal government is demanding that the auto industry recall millions of additional cars equipped with faulty air bags that can injure—and even kill—a driver. (AP Photo/Insurance Institute for Highway Safety)

Friedman said NHTSA is asking automakers for a complete list of vehicles with Takata inflators that are similar to the 2007 Mustang, and that information will be shared with the public when available. He did not know an exact number of vehicles involved.

Ford, Chrysler, Mazda and Honda said Tuesday that they're working with NHTSA, but they wouldn't say if they will expand their recalls. BMW said its recalls of Takata air bags already are national.

On Monday, The Associated Press reported that Honda was quietly fixing air bags across the nation if customers were concerned about their safety. So far, Honda has formally issued recalls in 13 states and territories.

For now, NHTSA isn't demanding a national recall of Takata's passenger side air bags, which have different inflators. The agency says it has been pushing the auto industry to do tests to make sure regional recalls cover all defective air bags. Friedman said that, so far, there have been no reports of passenger air bags rupturing outside the high-humidity areas.

However, the agency will require the automakers to set the same boundaries for regional recalls of passenger air bags.

Currently, some are recalling cars in Florida, Hawaii, the U.S. Virgin Islands and Puerto Rico, while others have larger zones. The agency wants all the recalls to cover those four areas, plus counties near the Gulf Coast in Texas, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and Louisiana, as well as Guam, Saipan and American Samoa.

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