# Firestone recalls millions of tires in US following accident reports

## Ford charges strikebound Illinois plant produced defective radials

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**16 August 2000**

Bridgestone/Firestone Inc. announced last week that it would recall millions of tires after investigations revealed that specific types of Firestone tires had been involved in hundreds of accidents and at least 46 deaths. The corporation is being investigated by the United States National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) and faces several lawsuits.

Included in the recall are 3.8 million Firestone radial ATX and ATX II tires and 2.7 million Wilderness AT tires. Seventy percent of these tires are found on Ford sport utility vehicles (SUVs) and light trucks, but they are also used on certain types of Nissan, Toyota and Subaru vehicles. As information becomes known the number of complaints of tire failures is growing, including reports of problems with Firestone tires not involved in the recall. Consumer advocacy groups are currently campaigning for an expansion of the recall.

Since the NHTSA began its investigation in May of this year, it has received nearly 300 complaints of accidents caused by the tires. Most of these complaints have originated from the southern states of Arizona, California, Florida and Texas. Apparently, the tires have a tendency to shred and peel off their casings—often while the car is traveling at high speeds—causing numerous crashes and turnovers. The corporations claim that improper maintenance of the tire, especially insufficient inflation, was often a factor in the accidents. High temperatures may also be a factor, thus accounting for the higher rates of incidents in the South.

Ford Motor Company has charged that many of Firestone's defective 15 inch radial ATX, ATX II and some Wilderness AT brands now under recall were made at the company's Decatur, Illinois plant during a strike in 1994-95. As of yet, there have been no reports detailing exactly what may have caused the tires to malfunction. However, workers there have charged that quality was sacrificed in order to produce more tires with less labor.

Six former Decatur tire workers have made charges highly critical of the company's quality control practices. Bubbles that formed in tires during the manufacturing process were punctured to conceal the flaw instead of being set aside as scrap while inspection of finished tires was curtailed in order to meet production quotas.

According to Ford there were few problems with the ATX tire in 1991. But tread separation with tires made in Decatur during 1994 skyrocketed. It was during this period that the United Rubber Workers engaged in a strike and lockout that extended to 1995. Firestone used replacement workers to continue production.

The United Steelworkers (USW), which has since absorbed the Rubber Workers union, is keeping relatively quiet about the issue. Presently the union is engaged in negotiations with Bridgestone/Firestone over a contract involving some 8,000 workers at several plants in Iowa, Ohio, Arkansas, Indiana and Oklahoma.

Wayne Ranick, a spokesperson for the USW, did admit that “Bridgestone at the time [during the strike of 1994-95] really made a concerted effort to break the union and I believe they really wanted to force a strike and replace workers and really try to improve their competitive position by lowering their labor costs way below industry standards.”

But Larry Werve, Local 713 USW publicity chairman for the Decatur plant, openly defended the company and denied there were any defective quality issues

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involved in tires made at the plant, including those manufactured by replacement workers during the strike. Werve declared, “Even those workers were required to work to standards, and their work was monitored by management.”

There is much evidence that both the tire manufacturer and Ford knew about the problems with the tires well before the recall was announced, perhaps as early as 1992. It was at this time the first of the lawsuits involving the tires was filed against Firestone. Since then, dozens of similar cases have been brought to court, with no action by the corporation.

“This is something that they've known about for a long time,” said Joan Claybrook, a former administrator for NHTSA and president of the consumer advocacy group Public Citizen. However, a gag rule has always been included as a condition for the settlement of the lawsuits, preventing the plaintiff from discussing the case with the public or government officials.

Both Firestone and Ford had claimed that they moved as quickly as possible in the interests of consumers, and that they had no information suggesting problems with the tires before the NHTSA investigation began in May. Now Ford is blaming Firestone for reacting slowly, stating that Firestone knew about the problems in 1997 while Ford claims to have learned of the problems only a week ago. Statistics collected by Firestone between 1997 and 1999 show rates of injury from tire malfunction to be 100 times above normal for some of the types recalled.

Ford's own investigations of the performance of the same tires used in other countries give the lie to its claims of ignorance. Last August, Ford replaced the Firestone tires being used on SUVs in Saudi Arabia, and did the same for tires in Thailand, Malaysia and South America earlier this year. This suggests that Ford was aware of potential problems, and yet did nothing to inform consumers in the United States, where the majority of the tires are used.

There are also indications that the government stalled before initiating an investigation. The NHTSA only took action after a Houston radio station aired a report suggesting that there might be problems with the tires. Initially, the station was denounced by Firestone, which stated that faulty tires did not cause the accidents cited in the report. However, as the number of complaints against the corporation grew in response to the radio station's report, the government opened up an investigation. Only after the NHTSA concluded that there might be problems with the tires, and only after a class action lawsuit was filed against the corporation, was the recall issued.

The recall, which will also include tires on Canadian automobiles, will take over a year to be completed, meaning that many consumers will either be forced to continue driving on potentially faulty tires or will have to pay for their own replacements. It is expected that the total cost for the Tokyo-based Bridgestone Corporation, which owns Bridgestone/Firestone Inc., will be over $350 million, in addition to any monetary awards for liability lawsuits.

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