

The Firestone recall: new evidence implicates Firestone and Ford in tire failures

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As the recall of Firestone tires proceeds in the United States and the number of complaints grows, new evidence suggests that the practices of both Bridgestone/Firestone and Ford Motor Company were involved in the widespread failure of the tires. Most of the tire failures involved Ford Explorer sport utility vehicles.

Earlier this month Firestone, a unit of Japan's Bridgestone Corporation, recalled its 15-inch ATX and ATX II tires, plus 15-inch Wilderness AT tires. The recall involved more than 6 million tires.

Since then, the number of complaints against the corporation has risen to over 700, and the number of deaths attributed to the failure of Firestone tires has climbed from 46 to 62. This number is expected to rise further as more complaints are processed by the US National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). Attorneys who have filed a class action lawsuit against the two companies have joined professional safety advocates in calling for the recall to be expanded to cover other Firestone tire sizes, bringing the total number of recalls to 44 million.

Both houses of the US Congress have launched probes into Firestone and Ford. On Friday a team of investigators from the House of Representatives' Commerce Committee went to Ford headquarters in Dearborn to examine corporate documents and interview Ford management. House investigators are scheduled to visit Firestone's US headquarters in Nashville, Tennessee on August 28. The Senate Commerce Committee has announced it will hold hearings September 6 on the tire failures.

For the most part accidents occurred after tire treads peeled off, causing tires to burst or otherwise malfunction so badly that drivers lost control of their vehicles, resulting in crashes or turnovers. The tires

involved are composed of many different materials, layered around an inner shell. The outermost layer is the tread, which covers two layers of steel cords.

It is still uncertain why the specific tires involved in the recall should have had such a high occurrence of tread separation. One possibility is production quality problems. Much attention has been focused on the Firestone plant in Decatur, Illinois. Depositions from former employees at the plant are currently being taken. Some of the employees cite lax quality control and poor working conditions at the factory. During the period when many of the recalled tires were made, the Decatur plant was involved in a strike, raising the possibility that quality declined while tires were being produced by strike-breakers.

But the Decatur plant is not the only facility cited for poor quality standards. A former worker from a Firestone plant in Wilson, North Carolina, where some of the recalled tires were produced, has provided testimony about similar problems at his factory.

The immediate response of the corporations has been to denounce these workers as "disgruntled" employees and dismiss their allegations. A leaflet was distributed at the Wilson plant calling for the workers to boycott the whistle blower's business, an automobile body shop, to protest his allegations against the company.

Quality control is not the only potential cause of the tire failures. There are suggestions of design problems, involving the way in which the treads are bonded with the rest of the tire. An insecure connection would have been worsened by heat, a common factor in many of the accidents, which in the United States occurred mostly in warmer southern states.

Similar problems were involved in a massive 1978 recall of Firestone 500 tires. A former tire expert from Bridgestone/Firestone has claimed that the highest

levels of company management were aware as early as the 1970s that the three types of tires being recalled—the ATX, the ATX II and the Wilderness AT—had design problems.

Another significant factor may have been low tire inflation, as a tire with less air has a larger area of contact with the road, generating more friction and therefore more heat. In this connection, the practices of Ford may have increased the failure rate. In the early 1990s, Ford recommended to owners of the highly profitable Explorer that they inflate the tires well below the pressure recommended by Firestone, 26 rather than 35 pounds per square inch (psi).

The *Los Angeles Times* reports that a prime motive may have been Ford's knowledge that the Explorer had a propensity to roll over during sharp turns, and that this problem increased when the tires were fully inflated. The Explorer was produced to replace an earlier sport utility vehicle, the Bronco II, which had come under attack for stability problems. But as the launch date for the Explorer approached, the vehicle performed poorly on rollover tests, even worse than the Bronco II.

Several suggestions were made by Ford engineers to improve its stability, including widening the track width of the vehicle. However, such a major design change would have delayed the production of the automobile, and the corporation was eager to get the Explorer on the market. It may therefore have settled on the stopgap of recommending low tire inflation.

Twenty six psi is at the low end of the acceptable inflation pressure. Ford asserts that tires should not fail at this level and points out that it made similar recommendations for other tire brands used on its Explorer, without encountering the same problems. However, low inflation would have exacerbated any existing faults in the tires, especially if, during normal use, the inflation level dropped below 26 psi. Tires inflated to less than 20 psi are considered by Ford to be “severely under-inflated.”

There is much evidence suggesting that the NHTSA, long singled out by safety advocates for its close ties to the automobile and transportation companies, knew that there were problems with the Firestone tires well before the recall. In 1993, for example, four tire complaints were filed with the NHTSA, three of which involved deaths resulting from the failure of the types of tires

being recalled. In 1998 and 1999, the federal agency received information from State Farm Insurance showing that there were 21 failures of Firestone ATX tires between 1992 and 1998.

The government has stated that these numbers were not strikingly high, but the NHTSA has long since given up conducting its own independent investigations of manufacturers, which would have allowed it to look further into the problem. It instead relies on the corporations' own reports.

Under public pressure, both Firestone and Ford have diverted production to speed up the recall process, which is expected to take well over a year to complete. Firestone began the process of airlifting tires from Japan to the United States Wednesday. Ford will idle three US plants beginning next Monday. Plants in St. Paul, Minnesota; Edison, New Jersey and Hazelwood, Missouri will be shut down for two weeks, so that tires normally used in automobile production can be set aside to meet the demand for replacements. The 6,000 workers at those plants will receive 95 percent of regular pay during the shutdown.



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