

Crisis at General Motors over safety recall

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A crisis is growing at General Motors over revelations that the company knew of a potentially lethal safety problem with several of its vehicle lines, but did nothing to correct the issue or warn customers for a decade.

General Motors CEO Mary Barra said she is personally taking over the recall of 1.6 million vehicles worldwide that have a flaw in the ignition switch that can lead to air bags not deploying in the case of an accident. In an unusual move, the company has also issued an apology. The defect has been linked to at least 13 deaths.

The recall involves the 2005-2007 Chevrolet Cobalt; 2003-2007 Saturn Ions; 2006-2007 Chevrolet HHR wagons and Pontiac Solstices and 2007 Saturn Sky sports cars and Pontiac G5 sedans. In its recall announcement GM said that it was aware of at least 31 accidents in which the ignition switch was in the wrong position and the airbags failed to deploy.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) reports that these cars can unexpectedly turn off if the key ring is too heavy, which can pull down on the key in the ignition taking it out of the “run” position. In addition a jarring event such as a crash could also cause the engine to shut off. If the key is out of the “run” position the airbags might not deploy in case of an accident.

According to a chronology that GM provided to safety regulators, the company was made aware of a problem with the ignition system of the Cobalt at least 10 years ago, but chose to do nothing.

GM’s protracted delay in making the recall announcement was abetted by the NHTSA, which, despite being made aware of the problem as early as 2007, never opened an investigation.

The first known fatality involving the defect happened in 2005 when 16-year-old Amber Marie Rose crashed her 2005 Chevrolet Cobalt. An investigator

hired by the victim’s adoptive father determined that the air bags did not deploy because the ignition switch was in the “off” position. The family sued and reached an out of court settlement with GM.

Even before the death of Rose the problem with the ignition switch had been brought to the attention of GM engineers. In 2004 GM engineers suggested a way to fix the problem, but company executives vetoed it.

In 2005, after GM continued to receive reports about the faulty ignition switch, there were six complaints from Cobalt owners who said they had accidentally turned off their engines. Engineers came up with another proposal for a fix, but again, GM executives said no. Instead of correcting the problem, GM sent a circular to dealers telling them to advise customers to take extra items off their keychains. But this advice was only given to customers who came in complaining of stalling problems with their Cobalts.

Later the same year GM became aware of a similar defect involving other models and sent an updated circular to dealers. But again, there was no recall or public announcement.

Finally in 2006, GM gave approval for a new ignition switch, but it assigned it the same part number as the defective switch, so that dealers and repair shops had a hard time determining which was the newer, safer part.

In 2007, GM at last assigned an engineer to track Cobalt crashes in which the air bags did not deploy. By the end of 2007 it was aware of 10 crashes in which the ignition switch was in the accessory mode and air bags did not inflate. But nothing came of it. Instead of addressing the question of whether its safety systems were operating properly, GM attempted to shift blame to the victims. It claimed that the majority of crashes involved high speeds and that in some cases victims were intoxicated or were not wearing seat belts.

Barra, an engineer by training, was an executive in the GM manufacturing division when the problems

with the Cobalt ignition first came to light.

Meanwhile, deaths and injuries kept piling up. While GM has refused to say how many lawsuits it faced due to the ignition switch problem, its chronology states, “throughout this period GM was involved in claims and lawsuits in which allegations were made regarding the ignition switch issue that is the subject of the recall.”

The NHTSA, the government agency that is supposed to serve as a watchdog over the automakers, did nothing to bring GM into line. The agency investigated two of the crashes involving the Cobalt, including the one involving Rose. In each case, it raised the possibility of a defect. But the agency did not open a broader investigation into the issue.

Now, in the wake of GM’s recall, the NHTSA has launched an investigation into the defect. GM could face fines of up to \$35 million if it is demonstrated that the company did not act in a timely manner to correct the problem. According to NHTSA rules, an automaker must report a safety defect within five working days. GM could also face a criminal investigation over the issue.

In remarks quoted in the *New York Times*, Clarence Ditlow, executive director of the Center for Auto Safety, a nonprofit consumer advocacy group, called the NHTSA inaction, “a complete failure of the system.” He continued, (GM) “got away with it because NHTSA never opened an investigation.”

GM apparently only finally issued the recall as the result of a lawsuit on behalf of one of the crash victims. Pediatric nurse Brooke Melton died in an automobile accident in 2010 on her 29th birthday in a Cobalt she bought in 2005. An attorney representing the estate of Melton says he believes that GM only went ahead with the recall because details of the faulty ignition switch would have come out this spring, when the case against the dealership that sold Melton her vehicle is scheduled to go to trial.



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