

Repair of defective GM ignitions may take until October

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A spokesman for General Motors announced that repairs of defective ignition switches in recently recalled models may not be completed until October. The auto maker said it was still waiting for replacement parts. Repairs of the switches, which are linked to dozens if not hundreds of crash-related deaths, were supposed to begin April 7.

GM claims the recalled vehicles are safe to drive if extra keys are taken off the key ring. Consumer advocates dispute that assertion and have advised owners of the recalled vehicles to park their cars until the repairs are completed.

Media reports on the victims of crashes linked to the ignition switch defect, of which GM was aware for more than a decade before it reported the problem to government regulators or the public, make clear that a large share of those who died were in their teens or early twenties. GM targeted sales of the small, low-cost models, such as the Chevrolet Cobalt, to young people.

GM failed to meet an April 3 deadline for answering 107 questions submitted by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) about safety issues related to the defective ignition switches. The company admitted it had not answered one-third of the questions by the deadline and declined to state what new facts were included in the documentation it had submitted thus far.

NHTSA fined GM the derisory sum of \$28,000 for failing to meet its deadline. The federal regulatory agency has not indicated when or if documents turned over by the auto company will be opened to public inspection.

These developments follow the appearance last week of CEO Mary Barra before US House and Senate committees investigating the delayed recall. Barra stonewalled the committees, repeatedly saying she had

no prior knowledge of the problem before becoming CEO in January, and could not answer questions until the company's internal investigation had been completed.

The auto maker has admitted that it knew as early as 2001 that the ignition switches of the Chevrolet Cobalt, Saturn Ion and other vehicles were defective, but did nothing to warn customers and only fixed the problem in cars produced after 2006. GM made the correction furtively, using the same identification numbers for both the old and new parts. The auto giant never recalled earlier models with defective switches until it issued a massive recall last February. The number of small GM cars recalled because of the defective switch has grown to 2.6 million.

The switches can be easily bumped or jarred out of the "run" position, killing the motor and disabling the power steering, power brakes and airbags.

Both Barra and David Friedman, interim head of NHTSA, testified at last week's hearings. Friedman defended the inaction of NHTSA, saying it was the responsibility of GM to inform it of safety problems.

It is now well established, however, that GM and government regulators were aware at least by 2007 of fatal crashes involving the Cobalt in which airbags failed to deploy and the ignition had been knocked out of the "run" position. The cover-up continued until a lawsuit brought by the family of an accident victim, Jennifer Melton, forced the release of documents showing that GM had long been aware of safety issues with the Cobalt ignition. That exposure, and the threat of further lawsuits, finally forced GM to issue a recall notice.

Former Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood is disputing allegations by Republican congressmen that the Obama administration's 2009 forced bankruptcy

and restructuring of GM played a role in the decision by government regulators not to issue a recall of the cars with defective ignition switches. The US government received a majority ownership share of GM as part of the bailout. The administration inserted terms in the bankruptcy settlement holding the reorganized GM harmless for product liability suits dating before July 2009.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Clarence Ditlow of the consumer advocacy group Center for Auto Safety (CAS) about the latest developments in the GM recall case. The CAS has issued an advisory warning owners of the recalled models that their vehicles are unsafe to drive and urging them to demand that GM provide a “loaner” car until the switches are replaced.

CAS has also called for a probe of the 2003-2010 Chevrolet Impala built by General Motors. The group says the computer algorithm that determines when an airbag is deployed may improperly turn off the airbag if a car occupant is bounced in his or her seat. The CAS says there were 143 fatalities in front-end crashes involving the 2003-2010 model year Impalas in which the air bags did not deploy.

The group commissioned its own independent survey of NHTSA records and determined that between 2002 and 2012 there were 303 deaths of front-seat occupants in crashes involving the Cobalt and Ion in which airbags did not deploy. This is far in excess of the 13 deaths GM has acknowledged as being related to the defect.

Ditlow gave his reaction to the testimony of Barra and Friedman before Congress. “She came in with stock answers,” he said. “There were documents showing that the cost of the part would be 90 cents and it would be offset by 10-15 cents in warranty costs.

“On the NHTSA side, there was little they knew, but they should have known. The final numbers will clearly be above 13 deaths. NHTSA is supposed to be investigating. NHTSA keeps a database of all fatal accidents. Why don’t you search them? If you are going into a defect investigation you go into each individual case.

“In the case of the GM ignition switches, I love it where NHTSA said they couldn’t find a record of their conclusion. I suspect the conclusion was ‘open an investigation,’ and they don’t want to admit that. If

you are not investigating, people are going to die.”

Ditlow explained that the CAS was doing its own independent study of ignition-related deaths. “We are doing a death watch,” he said. “We identify who we think are victims, and so far we have identified about 20. There are a whole bunch of Early Warning Reports that meet the scenario. The problem is that in most cases the police only keep records for five years. If everyone died in the crash, all you have is that the airbag did not go off. Sometimes you get lucky and it is within the time period for which there are records.

“I will give you an example of one case. There was a death in Missouri that the *New York Times* identified as looking like a clear ignition death. We went to the FARS (Fatality Analysis Reporting System) and cross-referenced it. It was a Saturn with a history of power cutting off, according to the deceased’s mother. The car died on a road where there was some flooding—it was swept off the road and the occupants drowned. The car isn’t around anymore and you are never going to find if the ignition was on or off.

“You had a phone call from the daughter to the mother saying the car died. GM will say it’s the water. But it could have been the switch.”



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