

GM expands ignition recall to include another defect it concealed

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On Thursday, General Motors issued a second recall notice on the 2.6 million compact cars it recalled in February and March because of a faulty ignition switch that has caused at least 13 deaths and 31 crashes. As in the case of the recalled ignition switches, GM knew of serious defects in the ignition lock cylinders in the same models for more than a decade, but failed to report the problem to federal regulators or recall the part until now.

The ignition problems involve small cars built by GM between the 2003 and 2011 model years, affecting the Chevrolet Cobalt and HHR, the Pontiac Solstice and GS, and the Saturn Ion and Sky.

The defective switch has resulted in numerous cases where the ignition shifted from “run” to “accessory” while the vehicle was being driven, suddenly cutting off the engine and the power steering and brakes, and incapacitating the air bags. While GM admits to 31 crashes and 13 deaths due to this defect, a study by a consumer group has concluded there were 303 fatal crashes between 2002 and 2012 involving Cobalts and Ions in which the air bags failed to deploy.

According to a statement issued by GM Thursday to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the faulty ignition lock cylinder—a separate defect from the ignition switch problem—can allow the ignition key to be removed while the engine is running, “leading to a possible rollaway, crash and occupant or pedestrian injuries.”

GM said it knew of several hundred complaints of keys coming out of the slot of the ignition lock cylinder in Cobalts and other small models while the engine was running. The company said it received its first complaint about the problem in 2005 and had replaced cylinders for free in more than 250,000 cars.

According to the April 2013 deposition of a GM

engineer in the wrongful death lawsuit filed on behalf of the family of Brooke Melton, a 29-year-old woman who died in a 2010 crash of a 2005 Cobalt, GM switched suppliers of the ignition cylinder lock in 2008 or 2009. In 2010, GM introduced a new key for the Cobalt.

This year alone, GM has recalled 7.2 million vehicles worldwide.

The recall of a second defective ignition part in GM compact cars after years of complaints, crashes, deaths and cover-up adds to the picture of evident negligence, or worse, on the part of the auto giant, and complicity on the part of federal regulators. The NHTSA was aware for years of the problem of GM compact car crashes, including fatal ones, in which the air bags failed to deploy, but repeatedly rejected recommendations from investigators that it initiate a formal investigation.

GM has acknowledged that it replaced the faulty ignition switch in new models beginning in 2006, without warning the drivers of the old models or recalling their vehicles. Moreover, it gave the new switch the same identification numbers as the old, defective switch, a blatant violation of manufacturing protocols and safety rules.

Now GM is rejecting calls from families of crash victims, consumer organizations and some legislators that it advise owners of the recalled cars to stop driving them until the ignitions problems are fixed, a process that is expected to extend into the fall. Instead, the company is insisting that the cars are safe so long as drivers remove all accessories from the ignition key.

The *New York Times* published an article Wednesday citing numerous cases in which drivers of recalled models used “naked” ignition keys and still had engine cut-offs.

The company is also resisting calls for it to compensate the families of all victims of crashes related to the defective ignition system. In testimony last week before House and Senate committees, CEO Mary Barra repeatedly referred to her company as the “new” GM, evidently alluding to provisions of the 2009 bankruptcy overseen by the Obama administration that released the company from liabilities predating the bankruptcy filing.

In her testimony before Congress, Barra repeatedly professed sympathy for the victims and their families and pledged to shift the “new” GM from a focus on cost to a focus on safety. At the same time, she refused to answer questions about the failure of the company to report the ignition problems to the government or recall the affected cars, saying she had to await the results of an internal GM investigation.

Her company’s legal strategy, however, belies her public posture. GM has reportedly used hardball tactics in an attempt to intimidate relatives of crash victims from suing the company.

A federal judge in Corpus Christie, Texas is preparing to rule on a suit filed by Chevrolet Cobalt owners Charles and Grace Silvas asking for an injunction to force GM to tell owners of recalled cars to take them off the road until the repairs have been made. In a filing in the case, GM has not only argued against the motion, it has asked the judge to require the plaintiffs to post a security bond to pay for damages to the corporation if it is ultimately found to have been wrongfully compelled to park the cars.

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