

General Motors recalls another 2.4 million vehicles

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In the wake of the US government's announcement of a token \$35 million fine against General Motors for covering up a deadly ignition defect linked to fatal crashes, the automaker has announced yet another massive recall, this time for 2.4 million vehicles in the US.

The recall includes 1.3 million Buick Enclave, Chevrolet Traverse, and GMC Acadia vehicles whose front safety belts can wear out due to people moving while wearing the belts.

GM also added 1 million vehicles to its April 29 recall to repair a transmission shift cable that can wear out. If that happens the driver may not be able to select a different gear, remove the key from the ignition or place the transmission into park. GM says the defect is linked to 18 crashes and one injury.

The latest recall brings the number of vehicles that GM has recalled this year to 13.6 million. It breaks the previous record of 10.75 million recalls set by the company in 2004. The moves are part of an effort by the company to present itself as safety-conscious in the wake of the devastating exposure of its ignition switch cover-up.

A faulty ignition switch on the Chevrolet Cobalt, Saturn Ion and other low-cost vehicles can cause the cars to suddenly lose power, disabling power steering, power brakes and airbags, leaving the occupants unprotected in the event of a crash. GM acknowledges 13 deaths and 31 crashes related to the defect. However, the real number is likely much greater. A review of NHTSA records commissioned by the Center for Auto Safety found 303 crashes involving the Ion and Cobalt between 2002 and 2012 where airbags did not deploy.

GM knew of the problem for more than a decade, but failed to order a recall until this year in the wake of

multiple lawsuits by the families of crash victims. For its part the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the company's supposed government watchdog, abetted the cover-up at every step, despite being aware of customer complaints of sudden engine shutoff and fatal crashes involving the now recalled vehicles in which the airbags did not deploy and the ignition was in the "accessory" or "off" position.

The automaker's claims that it has responded to the ignition scandal with openness and accountability is belied by its actions since the recall. It has sought to squelch product liability lawsuits by invoking its 2009 bankruptcy filing, claiming that it is not liable for problems related to defective vehicles sold prior to the bankruptcy. It also successfully fought a "park it" order, seeking to force GM to tell owners of the recalled vehicles not to drive their cars until repairs are made. Since the recall there have been at least two fatal accidents involving the recalled vehicles in which airbags did not deploy.

GM insists that knowledge of the ignition problem was limited to mid-level officials, but never reached top management. This is hardly credible. An article in the May 17 edition of the New York Times reports that, particularly in the last year, high-level officials in the company's legal department were dealing with the ignition issue. The Times also notes that Jim Federico, chief engineer of subcompact and electric vehicles, was scheduled to be deposed last August in relation to a lawsuit brought by the family of a crash victim. For two years prior Federico had been in charge of an internal GM investigation into the defective ignition switches. Federico was a top assistant to GM CEO Mary Barra, who at the time served as the head of global product development. GM settled the lawsuit for an undisclosed

sum rather than risk having Federico testify under oath. Yet in sworn testimony before Congress Barra claimed she did not know of the ignition issue before taking over as CEO on January 31 of this year.

Federico announced his sudden retirement earlier this month at the age of 56. GM claimed his departure had nothing to do with the ignition switch recall. Federico's departure follows that of Mark Reuss, head of global product development. Another top official, John Calabrese, vice president of Global Vehicle Engineering, also recently retired.

GM has suspended Ray DeGiorgio, the engineer who in 2006 authorized a change to the ignition switch of the Cobalt and other now recalled vehicles without issuing a new part number, a violation of basic standards. However, in testimony in a lawsuit brought by the family of a crash victim DeGiorgio said he had no knowledge of any design change.

The decision to make changes to the ignition switch without assigning a new part number suggested that GM wanted to cover up the fact that its cars were defective. It defies belief that such a departure from standard procedures could have been carried out without high-level involvement.



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