

# Automakers, US federal regulators limit recall of deadly airbags

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28 October 2014

Reports now indicate that some 30 million vehicles are equipped with dangerously defective airbags built by the Tokyo-based parts manufacturer Takata. To date, less than 8 million of the vehicles have been recalled, with owners expected to wait months for repairs.

The defective airbags can explode, especially under conditions of high humidity, spraying shrapnel onto passengers in the car cabin. There have been at least three deaths linked to the defect and more than 100 injuries.

To date, there have been only limited recalls of the airbags installed on vehicles built between 2002-07. In June, just 900,000 vehicles from nine car manufacturers were recalled in two US states, Hawaii and Florida, and two territories—Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. Honda since expanded that recall to 2.4 million vehicles in several other Southern and Southwestern states. High humidity can reportedly aggravate the problem by increasing the volatility of the components used in the airbag propellant.

The October 2 death of Hien Tran in Florida drew renewed attention to the issue. Tran died four days after crashing her Honda Accord. She suffered neck wounds from shrapnel shot out by an exploding airbag. Police initially thought she had been the victim of a stabbing.

In the wake of that tragedy, last week the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) expanded its initial recall to 7.8 million vehicles. However, the recall was again limited to a few states.

Safety advocates have strongly criticized NHTSA for limiting the recall based on geography. The limited recall means that owners of defective vehicles in non-recall states will not be notified and are not eligible for free repairs. There have been at least two fatal accidents involving the exploding airbags in states not covered by

the recall.

Further, other areas and regions can have high humidity and there is nothing preventing the owner of a car, say, in New York, from driving to Florida.

In 2004, the consumer group Center for Auto Safety unsuccessfully sued NHTSA, asserting that geographic recalls violated the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Act, which required automakers to notify all owners of defective vehicles and provide a free remedy.

While NHTSA urged owners of defective vehicles to contact auto dealers for repairs, the web site it listed for information on the recall did not work properly for several days. At least two automakers, Ford and Fiat, said that even though several of their vehicles are on the government list, they are not being subjected to a formal recall.

Honda says it doesn't have enough replacement parts to repair more than 5 million Accords that have been recalled due to the defect. For its part, Toyota is telling dealers to disable passenger side airbags and attach notes warning passengers not to ride in the front seat. Automakers have resisted calls to offer consumers a loaner vehicle until airbag repairs can be made.

Honda alerted Takata of the airbag problem as early as 2004, but no recall was issued at the time and federal regulators were not notified. Takata controls some 30 percent of the worldwide airbag market.

In 2008, Honda issued a recall for just 4,205 vehicles. Six months later it recalled another 510,000 cars. At about this time, NHTSA belatedly opened its own investigation, but quickly wrapped it up without taking any action. It didn't even wait to receive the full documentation it had requested from Honda.

The case of exploding airbags is only the latest instance in which NHTSA has operated transparently as an arm of the auto corporations. It failed to order a

recall of General Motors vehicles with defective ignition switches despite being aware of the problem as early as 2007. The ignitions of several low-end GM models can be jarred easily out of the “run” position, killing power to the engine. This will disable the airbags, leaving drivers unprotected in the event of a crash. At latest count, 29 deaths have been linked to the defect, with the actual toll likely in the hundreds. So Far 1,517 death and injury claims have been filed with the fund set up by GM to compensate victims.

Last year, NHTSA approved a sweetheart settlement with Chrysler relating to gas tanks on Jeep vehicles prone to explosion and fire in rear-end collisions. At least 50 deaths are linked to the defect. NHTSA’s initial investigation covered 5 million vehicles. The agency ultimately asked Chrysler to recall just 2.7 million vehicles that were most at risk, but the automaker refused. NHTSA then agreed to a smaller recall of just 1.5 million vehicles based on an improvised fix involving the installation of a rear trailer hitch, supposedly to provide more protection for the gas tank. However, research demonstrated that the hitch provided no additional protection in the event of a high-speed crash and, according to Chrysler’s own admission, only “incremental” protection at lower speeds.

NHTSA spends about as much of its budget on investigating safety defects as it spends supplying safety ratings for vehicles, an important marking tool for car manufacturers. Two-thirds of the cars it has rated for the 2015 model year have received its top 5-star rating. This despite the fact that 2014 has seen a record number of auto safety recalls.



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