

Toyota President Regrets Fatal Floormat Crash

by Yuri Kageyama, AP Business Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Toyota's president said it was "extremely regrettable" an American family died in a crash in which a floor mat in one of the Japanese automaker's vehicles is suspected as the cause.

"Four precious lives have been lost," Toyota Motor Corp. President Akio Toyoda said Friday. "I offer my deepest condolences."

Without giving specifics, he said an investigation was under way into the problem which potentially affects 3.8 million Toyota vehicles in the U.S., and may cause the accelerator to get stuck.

Toyoda, who took helm at the world's top automaker in June, told reporters in Tokyo that Toyota was cooperating with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration in the U.S. to investigate the cause of the August accident.

That crash killed California Highway Patrol Officer Mark Saylor, 45 — who was driving a Lexus, a Toyota luxury model — and three family members on State Route 125 outside San Diego.

The vehicle was traveling at more than 120 mph when it launched off an embankment, rolled several times and burst into flames.

Toyoda said the company was still deciding what action it would take and did not acknowledge any vehicle problem during his appearance at the Japan National Press Club.

He apologized for any worries customers may have.

"I feel sorry that people who are driving Toyota and Lexus cars believing in their safety are now feeling uncertainties," he said.

NHTSA investigators determined that a rubber all-weather floor mat found in the wreckage was slightly longer than the mat that belonged in the vehicle, something that could have snared or covered the accelerator pedal.

Toyota has issued a safety advisory urging owners of 3.8 million car and trucks — including popular models like Camry, Prius and Tacoma — to remove driver-side mats. It wants drivers to watch out for loose or incorrect mats that could slide out of position and cover pedals.

NHTSA has said it had received reports of 102 incidents in which the accelerator

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may have become stuck in the Toyota vehicles involved. It was unclear how many led to crashes.

The warning affects 2007-2010 model year Toyota Camry, 2005-2010 Toyota Avalon, 2004-2009 Toyota Prius, 2005-2010 Tacoma, 2007-2010 Toyota Tundra, 2007-2010 Lexus ES350 and 2006-2010 Lexus IS250 and IS350.

In mid-September, Toyota ordered 1,400 Toyota and Lexus dealers nationwide to ensure that each new, used and loaner vehicle had the proper floor mats and that the mats were properly secured.

In September 2007, Toyota recalled an accessory all-weather floor mat sold for use in some 2007 and 2008 model year Lexus ES 350 and Toyota Camry vehicles because of similar problems.

Toyoda, 53, grandson of Toyota's founder, declined comment when asked whether floor mat problems could hurt sales and earnings.

Toyota's global sales were battered by last year's financial crisis but were gradually showing signs of recovery. Toyota is still expecting to stay in the red for the second straight fiscal year through March 2010.

Toyoda warned his company was in a "near rock-bottom" crisis, but said a comeback was possible. He said troubled companies look for "salvation," but customers, not the president, are the only ones who can deliver it.

Toyota became the world's top-selling automaker in 2008, dethroning General Motors Co. It had appeared on track to hit 10 million in annual global vehicle sales, but is now expecting to sell 7.3 million vehicles around the world this calendar year, down from 8.97 million vehicles last year.

"What's important is each and every customer. That is my management philosophy," said Toyoda.

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