Complaints Of Sudden Acceleration Deaths Rise To 34

Ken Thomas, Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Complaints of deaths connected to sudden acceleration in Toyota vehicles have surged in recent weeks, with the alleged death toll reaching 34 since 2000, according to new consumer data gathered by the government.

Complaints to a database maintained by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration about the popular Toyota Prius hybrid grew by nearly 1,000 in just over a week.

On Monday, Transportation Department spokeswoman Olivia Alair said NHTSA is quickly gathering information to help guide the government's examination of sudden acceleration, the Prius braking system and other safety issues.

Toyota Motor Corp. has recalled 8.5 million vehicles globally during the past four months because of problems with gas pedals, floor mats and brakes, threatening the safety and quality reputation of the world's No. 1 automaker. The government typically receives a surge in complaints following a recall. None has yet been verified.

The new complaints reflect the heightened awareness of the massive recalls among the public and underscore a flurry of lawsuits on behalf of drivers alleging deaths and injuries in Toyota crashes. Three congressional hearings are planned on the Toyota recalls.

In the past three weeks, consumers have told the government about nine crashes involving 13 alleged deaths between 2005 and 2010 due to accelerator problems, according to a NHTSA database. The latest reports are in addition to previous complaints from consumers that alleged 21 deaths from 2000 to the end of last year.

The database also shows that new complaints skyrocketed over the 2010 Prius gas-electric hybrid, which was recalled last week to replace braking software.

When NHTSA opened its investigation of Prius on Feb. 3, the government had received 124 consumer complaints. Through Feb. 11, the government had a total of 1,120 complaints alleging 34 crashes, six injuries and no deaths.

The government has renewed an investigation into potential electromagnetic problems in vehicles built by Toyota and other manufacturers. Consumer groups have pointed to potential electrical problems while the company has said recalls to fix sticking gas pedals or accelerators that can become jammed will address the problem.

Toyota spokeswoman Martha Voss said the company takes "all customer reports seriously and will, of course, look into new claims." Toyota was taking steps to improve quality control and investigate customer complaints more aggressively, Voss said.

Testing by Toyota, NHTSA and Exponent, an outside consulting firm hired by Toyota, has found no evidence of problems with Toyota's electronics, said Toyota Vice President Bob Carter at the National Automobile Dealers Association convention in Orlando, Fla.

"There is no problem with the electronic throttle system in Toyotas," Carter said Monday. "There's not anything that can even remotely lead you in that direction." Carter said Exponent was told to tear the components apart to try to find anything wrong and initial tests could find nothing.

Carter said Toyota has repaired about 500,000 of the 2.3 million vehicles recalled over a potentially sticky gas pedal.

Toyota has received many complaints over vehicle speed control in the 2009 and 2008 model years, according to an Associated Press analysis of government data.

In 2009, Toyota received the most complaints that year — a total of 130 for Toyota, Lexus and Scion vehicles. Ford and its Mercury brand received the second-highest with 14, followed by General Motors and Honda vehicles with 9.

Among Toyota vehicles in the 2009 model year, the Camry led the list of models with 52 complaints, followed by Corolla (17), Tacoma (16) and Prius (13). The AP found eight of the top 10 vehicles with complaints over vehicle speed control were manufactured by Toyota.

In the 2008 model year, Toyota vehicles received 176 complaints of vehicle speed control, followed by Ford with 44 and Chrysler with 25. In that year, Prius had 31 complaints, followed by Tacoma with 28 and Camry with 25.

Since Jan. 27, NHTSA has processed 686 complaints from consumers about problems related to "vehicle speed control" on cars and trucks manufactured by Toyota, nearly all of them submitted through NHTSA's Web site or by e-mail.

Regarding the AP analysis, Alair, the Transportation Department spokeswoman, noted that Toyota had a large market share of vehicles in the U.S. but said she could not comment on the AP figures without further analysis.

AP Business Writer Matthew Fordahl in New York and AP Auto Writer Tom Krisher in Orlando, Fla., contributed to this report.

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