

Governors To Congress: Be Fair To Toyota

Roger Alford, Associated Press Writer

FRANKFORT, Ky. (AP) — Four governors of states with Toyota plants called Wednesday for Congress to be fair to the automaker in hearings concerning safety recalls.

Kentucky Gov. Steve Beshear, Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels, Mississippi Gov. Haley Barbour and Alabama Gov. Bob Riley asked in a letter Wednesday that Toyota get "a responsible and fair response from the federal government."

"Toyota must put the safety of drivers first and foremost," Beshear said in a statement. "However, they deserve a level and reasonable response from the federal government — one that is not tainted by the federal government's financial interest in some of Toyota's competitors."

The governor was referring to money the federal government invested in Chrysler and General Motors last year.

Toyota has recalled nearly 8.5 million vehicles around the globe since November for problems that include floor mats that can entangle the gas pedal, gas pedals that can stick, causing sudden acceleration, and braking problems. The recalls have drawn interest in Congress, where lawmakers are looking into how the company handled the recalls and whether the government properly investigated numerous complaints.

Critics have accused Toyota, the world's No. 1 automaker, of moving too slowly to address safety concerns and fix the millions of vehicles involved in the massive recalls. The company is engaging in a fierce lobbying campaign to salvage its reputation and has hired additional lobbyists, lawyers and public relations experts in advance of congressional hearings later this month.

The letter did not include signatures from the governor of California, which is home to Toyota's North American headquarters, or the governors of West Virginia and Texas, where the company has manufacturing plants.

Beshear spokeswoman Kerri Richardson said the idea for the letter originated in Kentucky. She said Beshear simply wanted to affirm Toyota as a good corporate citizen.

"No one asked us to do it," Richardson said.

West Virginia Gov. Joe Manchin is writing his own letter to Congress, spokesman Matt Turner said. Manchin shares the concerns expressed by the other governors, Turner said, and also wants to provide more information about the automaker's role as employer and corporate neighbor in West Virginia.

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Richardson said the Texas governor indicated that he would write his own letter and that the California governor wasn't asked to participate.

Toyota is planning to halt production at the Fremont, Calif.-based New United Motor Manufacturing Inc. plant. The plant, established in 1984 in a joint venture with General Motors, employs 4,600 workers and makes the Pontiac Vibe station wagon for GM, and the Corolla compact car and Tacoma pickup truck for Toyota.

Toyota is scheduled to close the plant in March despite efforts by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, members of congress and state officials to keep the plant open. The governor at one point offered tax breaks and other incentives to try to save the plant.

Schwarzenegger's spokesman, Aaron McLearn, said the governor was not asked to write a letter supporting Toyota, nor did he send one.

Those who signed did so based on their experiences with the company, said Barbour spokeswoman Laura Hipp.

"In Mississippi, Toyota is a valuable partner in building a highly skilled, high-tech workforce," she said. "Governor Barbour wanted to convey his confidence in the auto maker and in Toyota's beginning operations in Mississippi when market conditions improve."

The House Oversight Committee and the House Energy and Commerce Committee are planning hearings, as is the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee.

In the letter, the governors said that Toyota employs more than 172,000 Americans in plants and dealerships across the nation and said the company's continued success is in the national interest.

"Besides the obvious good-paying jobs provided in our states, Toyota demonstrates a commendable positive spirit not only with its own employees, but also in the communities and neighborhoods within which its plants operate," the governors said.

They also criticized what they called "aggressive and questionable" news coverage "when the real story is how quickly Toyota identified the problems, found solutions and delivered those solutions to its dealers worldwide."

Associated Press writers Ken Thomas in Washington; Larry Messina in Charleston, W.Va.; Emily Wagster in Jackson, Miss.; and Judy Lin in Sacramento, Calif. contributed to this report.

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