

Toyota Begins Fixing Accelerators On Recalled Vehicles

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Toyota Motor Corp. said Monday its dealers should get parts to fix a sticky gas pedal problem by the end of this week as the automaker apologized to customers and tried to bring an end to a recall that has affected 4.2 million vehicles worldwide.

The company said in a statement that it has begun shipping parts and is training dealers on the repairs. Some dealers will stay open 24 hours to fix the 2.3 million cars and trucks affected by the recall in the U.S.

Technical bulletins on how to install the new parts should arrive at dealers by midweek, the company told dealers in an e-mail. It was not clear exactly when repairs would start, although dealers have said they'll begin as soon as possible.

The automaker also said Monday it would suspend production of eight U.S. models affected by the recall for this week. The company also suspended sales of the models last week until repairs can be made.

Jim Lentz, president and chief operating officer of Toyota Motor Sales, said in the statement that nothing is more important than customer safety.

In a video clip released by the automaker, Lentz said he wanted to "sincerely apologize to Toyota owners. I know that our recalls have caused many of you concern and for that I am truly sorry."

"Toyota has always prided itself on building high-quality, durable cars that customers can depend on and I know that we've let you down," Lentz said.

Lentz, in an interview on NBC's "Today," said the automaker was "confident that we have the fix" for the gas pedal system. He said the company first developed a report on the problems in late October, and he denied that Toyota had delayed addressing the problem.

"I drive Toyotas. My family members drive Toyotas ... I would not have them in products that I knew were not safe," Lentz said.

Tammy Darvish, a dealer in the Washington, D.C., area, said she expects to get parts Thursday night or Friday morning, and her dealership will begin repairs immediately, staying open around the clock.

Darvish said she has set up a 24-hour hotline for her 30,000 Toyota customers and had already begun to schedule appointments for later this week. She estimated it

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could take about two weeks for all the vehicles to be fixed.

"No matter what Toyota does, they always do it right," Darvish said. "They might be a little slow in coming out, but that's because they're diligent."

Toyota recalled the vehicles on Jan. 21, determining that excess friction in the gas pedal assembly could in rare cases cause the pedals to stick.

Engineers traced the problem to a friction device in the assembly that is supposed to provide the proper pedal "feel" by adding resistance, Toyota said in a statement.

The device has a shoe that rubs against a nearby metal surface during normal pedal use. But wear and environmental conditions can over time cause the pedals to not operate smoothly or in rare cases stick partially open.

The company said a steel reinforcement bar will be installed, reducing the friction.

"With this reinforcement in place, the excess friction that can cause the pedal to stick is eliminated," the statement said. "The company has confirmed the effectiveness of the newly reinforced pedals through rigorous testing on pedal assemblies that had previously shown a tendency to stick."

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration told Toyota last week that it was satisfied with the repair plan. Legally Toyota did not need NHTSA's approval, but the company would be unlikely to proceed without the government's blessing.

Toyota told its dealers in an e-mail that they should determine what vehicles to repair first. The company said it "strongly recommends dealers prioritize consumer vehicles first, followed by dealer owned inventory." The repairs are expected to take about 30 minutes of work, and drivers should not notice any change in the feel of the pedal.

Owners are expected to receive information by mail beginning this week. The company will cover all repair costs.

Since the recall was announced, dealers have been in the difficult position of telling angry customers that they have no parts to fix the cars.

The recall in the U.S. includes the 2009-10 RAV4 crossover, the 2009-10 Corolla, the 2009-10 Matrix hatchback, the 2005-10 Avalon, the 2007-10 Camry, the 2010 Highlander crossover, the 2007-10 Tundra pickup and the 2008-10 Sequoia SUV. It also has been expanded to another 1.9 million vehicles in Europe and China.

Toyota said that not all the models of Camry, RAV4, Corolla and Highlander listed in the recall have the faulty gas pedals, which were made by CTS Corp. of Elkhart, Ind. Dealers can tell which models have the CTS pedals. Models made in Japan, and some models built in the U.S., have pedal systems made by another parts supplier, Denso Corp., which function well.

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All Matrix, Avalon, Tundra and Sequoia models covered by the recall have the faulty pedals.

Toyota announced late Friday that it would begin shipping new gas pedal systems to dealers as well.

On Sunday, Toyota took out full-page ads in 20 major newspapers to reassure customers.

But crisis management experts said the company's reputation for impeccable reliability has been damaged.

Meanwhile, Consumer Reports, an influential publication for car buyers, on Friday suspended its "recommended" status for the eight recalled Toyota models.

The pedal recall is separate from another recall involving floor mats that can bend and push down accelerators. The two recalls combined affect more than 7 million vehicles worldwide.

The repairs will not bring an end to public scrutiny on how Toyota handled the problems.

The U.S. House Oversight and Government Reform Committee is launching an investigation. It has scheduled a Feb. 10 hearing titled "Toyota Gas Pedals: Is the Public at Risk?" and asked Yoshi Inaba, chairman and CEO of Toyota Motor North America, to testify. Separately, a House investigative panel is planning a Feb. 25 hearing.

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Tom Krisher reported from Detroit.

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