

# Toyota Recalls 437,000 Priuses For Braking Software

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TOKYO (AP) — Toyota says it is recalling about 437,000 Prius and other hybrid vehicles worldwide to fix brake problems — the latest in a string of embarrassing safety lapses at the world's largest automaker.

"I don't see Toyota as an infallible company that never makes mistakes," President Akio Toyoda said at a press conference Tuesday in Tokyo. "We will face up to the facts and correct the problem, putting customers' safety and convenience first."

With the Prius announcement, the number of vehicles recalled globally by Toyota Motor Corp. has ballooned to 8.5 million, including for floor mats which can trap gas pedals and faulty gas pedals that are slow to return to the idle position. The 2010 Prius wasn't part of the earlier recalls.

There have been about 200 complaints in Japan and the U.S. about a delay when the brakes in the Prius were pressed in cold conditions and on some bumpy roads. The delay doesn't indicate a brake failure. The company says the problem can be fixed in 40 minutes with new software that oversees the controls of the antilock brakes.

"Let me assure everyone that we will redouble our commitment to quality as the lifeline of our company," Toyoda said.

Toyota officials went to Japan's Transport Ministry earlier Tuesday to formally notify officials the company is recalling the 2010 Prius gas-electric hybrid — the world's top-selling hybrid car. The automaker is also recalling two other hybrid models in Japan, the Lexus HS250h sedan, sold in the U.S. and Japan, and the Sai, which is sold only in Japan.

The 223,000 cars being recalled in Japan include nearly 200,000 Priuses sold from April last year through Monday, according to papers the automaker filed with the ministry. The Prius is Japan's top-selling car.

In the U.S., Toyota will recall 133,000 Prius cars and 14,500 Lexus HS250h vehicles. Nearly 53,000 Priuses are also being recalled in Europe. Toyota is suspending production of the Sai and Lexus HS250h in Japan until the updated software for those models is ready.

If drivers experience a delayed reaction when depressing the brakes in any of these models, they should keep pressing, according to Toyota and the transport ministry.

The Prius repairs will start in Japan on Wednesday. U.S. owners will start receiving

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letters about the recall next week.

Toyoda, the president, has been criticized for being largely invisible during the two weeks after the company announced Jan. 21 the gas pedal recall in the U.S., Europe and China.

He apologized at his first public press conference last Friday, but was criticized by the Japanese media for failing to outline concrete steps to tackle the safety crisis and reassure customers around the world.

In contrast to his halting English in response to questions from foreign reporters at last week's news conference, Toyoda seemed much better prepared Tuesday, reading from an English statement after doing so in Japanese.

"We will do everything in our power to regain the confidence of our customers," Toyoda said.

He said he planned to go to the U.S. soon to talk with American workers and dealers to bring the ranks together.

Analysts said fears of an even bigger consumer backlash prodded Toyota into recalling the Prius.

"If they hadn't done the recalls, their image would have suffered even more," said Ryoichi Saito, auto analyst at Mizuho Investors Securities in Tokyo.

The Japanese transport ministry rapped Toyota as reacting too slowly, and said he was meeting U.S. Ambassador to Japan John Roos Wednesday to exchange views about Toyota's recalls and make sure U.S.-Japan relations remained on good terms.

"The consideration for customers was lacking in Toyota," Seiji Maehara told reporters, after a meeting with Toyoda. "We hope this never happens again."

Toyoda, who visited the minister after his news conference, apologized and explained the recalls, Maehara said.

U.S. safety officials have launched an investigation into problems with the brakes.

The problem is suspected in four crashes resulting in two minor injuries, according to data gathered by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, which is investigating the matter. Toyota says it's cooperating with NHTSA's investigation.

Problems with hybrid braking systems haven't been limited to Toyota.

Ford Motor Co. said last week it plans to fix 17,600 Mercury Milan and Ford Fusion gas-electric hybrids because of a software problem that can give drivers the impression that the brakes have failed. The automaker says the problem occurs in transition between two braking systems and at no time are drivers without brakes.

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Toyota's plug-in hybrid is also being recalled in Japan, Europe and the U.S., but in small numbers because it is a largely experimental model for rental and government use.

The Prius holds a cherished spot in Toyota's vehicle lineup and is symbolic of its leadership in the "green" car market.

The Toyota executive overseeing quality Shinichi Sasaki said the delay that Prius drivers can feel when braking lasts for a fraction of a second as the antilock brakes kick in.

The problem happens only on snowy or bumpy surfaces, and the complaints did not become more numerous until recently when the weather got colder, Sasaki said.

But Toyota acknowledged the company could have done better in picking up on the complaints, managing the crisis and sending a message to car owners on a fix.

In the U.S., Toyota will add five more centers in addition to the current three that investigate customer complaints, Sasaki said.

"When compared to the size of Japan, America is so much bigger and so our network for gathering information was not enough," he said.

Toyota was one of the first companies to mass-market a hybrid that combines an electric motor with a gas engine, introducing the Prius in Japan in 1997. Its high gas mileage made it popular among environmentally conscious drivers, especially when gas prices spiked two years ago.

But the complexity of the Prius, a highly computerized car, has led to problems in the past. In 2005, the company repaired 75,000 of them to fix software glitches that caused the engine to stall. It has also had trouble with headlights going out.

Shares in Toyota rose 2.9 percent Tuesday to 3,375 yen, but are still down about 20 percent since Jan. 21, when it announced the gas pedal recall.

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