Feds Consider Brake Overrides In All New Cars

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said Tuesday his agency may recommend that all new vehicles sold in the U.S. be equipped with brakes that can override the gas pedal. The idea seemed to be gaining support among lawmakers as Toyota officials returned for a third hearing on lethal safety defects.

"We will not rest until these cars are safe," LaHood told the Senate Commerce Committee.

He said the "Toyota business model is broken" but predicted improvements. "I think you'll see some changes in the way they do business," LaHood told the panel.

His testimony came as federal safety officials increased to 52 the number of reported deaths linked to sudden acceleration in Toyota vehicles, through the end of last month. Previously, 34 deaths were blamed on the problem.

Toyota Motor Corp. and federal regulators both faced questions from Congress over the giant Japanese car company's troubled safety record.

"We know something has gone terribly wrong," said Senate Commerce Committee Chairman Jay Rockefeller, D-W.Va. "The system meant to safeguard against faulty vehicles has failed, and it needs to be fixed and it needs to be fixed right away."

Multiple recalls have damaged Toyota's reputation and set the stage for large numbers of death and injury lawsuits amid a criminal investigation by federal prosecutors in New York, a probe by the Securities and Exchange Commission and more scrutiny from the Transportation Department. Since September, Toyota has recalled about 6 million vehicles in the U.S.

One element of new legislation could be a requirement that all newly manufactured cars sold in the United States have a break override system.

Toyota has said it will put such an override system into all future vehicles and will retrofit many recalled models. More than 8 million Toyota cars have been recalled because of sudden acceleration or breaking defects.

The backup safety system under discussion overrides the accelerator if the gas and brake pedals are pressed at the same time.

"It means the brake always overrides the accelerator," Rockfeller said. "Why don't we require every manufacturer to do this?"

LaHood responded: "We are looking at the possibility of recommending the brake override system in all newly manufactured automobiles."

The new number of 52 deaths was surfaced by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, part of the Department of Transportation. Federal officials haven't formally confirmed the links between deaths and Toyota defects but have received a spike in complaints since Toyota began a series of big recalls in October.

Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, noted that not just Toyota cars have defects, but that other automakers also have been subject to millions of recalls. "It is not a Toyota problem, it is an industry problem," he said.

Inouye noted that over much of the past decade, recalls of vehicles made by Ford, General Motors and Chrysler dwarfed Toyota recalls.

"If it is an industry problem, we should hear from the industry, instead of just Toyota," Inouye said.

Rockefeller, whose state is the site of a Toyota plant, said, "It is clear that somewhere along the way public safety took a back seat and corporate profits drove the company's decisions."

Rockefeller has known Toyota's founding family since the 1960s and helped land a Toyota engine plant in Buffalo, W.Va., during the 1990s. Rockefeller last month asked the Transportation Department's Inspector General to conduct an audit of the government's response to the recalls and has sought information from Toyota, the government and auto insurers.

The committee — formally the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation — is probing whether Toyota and federal safety regulators acted swiftly enough.

Three Toyota officials were due to testify later Tuesday.

Toyota President Akio Toyoda pledged last week before a House panel to be more responsive to driver complaints and safety warnings from the government. Toyoda made a similar promise to improve quality control while apologizing Monday to Chinese Toyota owners.

But the company still faces lingering doubts over the cause of the problems, which it has blamed on gas pedals that can get obstructed by floor mats or stick due to design flaws. Safety experts have said the electronic systems of Toyota vehicles also could be to blame. Toyota insists there is no evidence of an electrical cause.

Rockefeller said that federal investigators were reluctant to investigate whether vehicle electronics were to blame for problems with cars speeding out of control because it is harder to detect electronic problems.

NHTSA "would rather focus on floor mats than microchips because they understand floor mats," Rockefeller said.

LaHood responded that his agency will do a "complete review" of the electronics issue.

Adding to Toyota's woes, the automaker said Tuesday it is repairing more than 1.6 million vehicles around the world, including the U.S. and Japan, for potentially leaky oil hoses.

NHTSA is seeking records on Toyota's recalls and investigating whether electronics were behind the vehicle defects. NHTSA also continues to look into steering complaints from drivers of the popular Corolla model.

Joining LaHood at the witness table was NHTSA Administrator David Strickland, a former Senate Commerce Committee aide. The Senate committee also heard from Clarence Ditlow, president of the Center for Auto Safety, which has investigated the Toyota complaints.

Toyota sent three company executives: Yoshi Inaba, Toyota's North American president; Shinichi Sasaki, a Toyota executive vice president who oversees quality control; and Takeshi Uchiyamada, a Toyota executive vice president who is considered the father of the Prius hybrid.

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