

Lawmakers: Black Boxes For All New Cars

Ken Thomas, Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — New cars and trucks would be required to carry black boxes to record crash information and automakers would pay fees to help fund the government's auto safety agency under a series of proposals in Congress in response to Toyota's massive recalls.

The House Energy and Commerce Committee on Thursday released a draft that could form the basis of legislation to strengthen vehicle safety and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Lawmakers have vowed to address auto safety after Toyota recalled more than 8 million vehicles worldwide and paid a record \$16.4 million government fine for slowly responding to a recall.

The draft legislation, released by Energy and Commerce Chairman Henry Waxman, a Democrat, would eliminate the cap on civil penalties an automaker could face and allow NHTSA to order an immediate recall if it finds an "imminent hazard of death or serious injury." It would also require new safety standards related to brake override systems, the prevention of pedals from getting trapped in floor mats and vehicle electronics.

Toyota has said it will install brake override systems in all future models and retroactively on some existing ones. The system automatically disengages the throttle if a driver presses on the brakes.

Some Toyota owners have filed lawsuits contending that Toyota's electronic throttle control systems are to blame for vehicles suddenly accelerating. The company has insisted electronics are not causing the problem.

The proposal would require a U.S. auto executive to certify the accuracy of information submitted to NHTSA in response to a government investigation. Any executive who provided false information could face up to \$250 million in fines.

Vehicles would be required to be equipped with event data recorders, commonly known as black boxes, to help authorities reconstruct the elements that led to a crash.

The plan also creates a "vehicle user fee" of \$3 per vehicle, increasing to \$9 in its third year, to fund NHTSA's vehicle safety program. Safety groups have said the agency is underfunded and ill-equipped to investigate complicated safety problems.

Waxman's committee is expected to hold a hearing on the proposal next week and Congress is expected to consider legislation this year.

Toyota, meanwhile, said it had appointed six outside experts to an independent panel charged with advising the company on safety and quality issues. The panel

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will be led by Rodney Slater, who served as transportation secretary during the Clinton administration.

Toyota said the panel includes Norman Augustine, a former chairman and CEO of Lockheed Martin Corp.; Patricia Goldman, a former vice chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board; and Brian O'Neill, a former president of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

Slater said the panel hopes to offer insights to Congress as it reviews the company's safety and quality issues. Panelists have begun onsite reviews of the company's facilities in the United States and will travel to Japan in May to meet with senior executives.

Slater said the task force will evaluate the electronic throttle control systems installed in Toyota and Lexus vehicles and make its findings public. The group will have access to research conducted by Exponent, a California consulting firm reviewing Toyota's electronics, but Slater stressed they could also contact outside experts if necessary.

Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood met with Japan's transport minister, Seiji Maehara, on Thursday in advance of a trip to Japan next month that will include meetings with Toyota executives.

Maehara told reporters that he appreciated the "fair and equal treatment" of the automaker by U.S. regulators and did not expect the recalls to affect relations between the two nations.

Toyota said it had resumed sales of the 2010 Lexus GX 460, a luxury SUV recalled after Consumer Reports warned that the vehicle could be vulnerable to rollover dangers.

Lexus Group Vice President Mark Templin said a software update to fix the vehicle stability control system was now available for the GX 460 and dealers had begun contacting customers to schedule repairs. Nearly 10,000 vehicles are covered by the recall.

Consumer Reports plans to test the car again after the fix is installed, the magazine said.

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AP Auto Writer Dan Strumpf in New York contributed to this report.

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