

No 'Cover-Up' By Reformed Toyota

Yuri Kageyama, AP Business Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Japan's transport minister criticized Toyota on Tuesday as initially too slow in responding to its recall crisis, but said the automaker had learned its lesson and is getting quicker in announcing recalls.

Seiji Maehara, who will meet U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood later this week during a trip to Washington, said the Japanese government is checking Toyota Motor Corp.'s vehicles, including the Prius hybrid, for possible problems with electronic devices but has found no problem so far.

"Toyota has on its own recognized that it had been slow," said Maehara, who heads the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism.

Toyota took just a week to announce a recall of a Lexus sport utility model in the U.S. earlier this month, after Consumer Reports warned it may be prone to rollovers.

That was a contrast to the four months the U.S. government says Toyota took to order its huge recall of other models over sticking gas pedals.

"Consumer Reports is respected and objective and so the recall came immediately," Maehara told a small group of reporters in his Tokyo office.

Maehara said the Toyota problem was sure to be discussed when he meets LaHood, although a personal sales-pitch for Japanese trains is high on his agenda.

But he stressed the exchanges on Toyota would take "wide perspective," centering on the importance of U.S.-Japan cooperation on issues such as Toyota.

"Should there be any Japan-bashing, that would not be positive for the American economy either," he said, referring to a possible extreme backlash against Japanese manufacturers, which he said had been avoided so far.

"Safety is of utmost importance for any nation," he said. "And it is an obligation that must be met by the company."

Toyota, which has recalled more than 8 million vehicles worldwide since October, has recalled only the Prius and some other hybrid models in Japan for a braking glitch.

Toyota's quality woes have not drawn the widespread attention in Japan as they have in the U.S. because the massive recalls for faulty gas pedals and floor mats have not affected models sold in Japan.

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Maehara has expressed discontent about how Toyota failed to keep in closer contact with the Japanese government about defects.

In Japan, Toyota quietly fixed the Prius brake software in some vehicles in January before going public with a recall in February. Some Toyota officials had appeared to brush off the seriousness of the problem as merely "a feeling."

But Maehara softened his tone ahead of his U.S. trip.

"I do not think there was any cover-up," he said.

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