Toyota Official: 'We Need To Come Clean'

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Five days before Toyota announced a massive recall, a U.S. public relations executive at the automaker warned colleagues in an internal e-mail: "We need to come clean" about accelerator problems, according to documents obtained by The Associated Press on Wednesday.

"We are not protecting our customers by keeping this quiet," wrote Irv Miller, group vice president for environment and public affairs. "The time to hide on this one is over."

The recently retired Miller wrote the e-mail on Jan. 16, 2010, as Toyota officials were on their way to Washington to discuss the problems with federal regulators. On Jan. 21, Toyota announced it would recall 2.3 million vehicles to address sticking pedals in six vehicle models.

The e-mail reveals deep concerns within the company's leadership that Toyota wasn't dealing with the safety problems effectively and could damage the automaker's sterling reputation for producing safe and reliable vehicles.

The company already had announced a recall of more than 4 million vehicles in the U.S. in late September 2009 to replace gas pedals that could get stuck in floor mats and cause sudden acceleration.

The documents show that Toyota's European division, at the same time, told its distributors it was "identifying a production improvement and repair procedure to address complaints by customers in those countries of sticking accelerator pedals, sudden rpm increase and/or sudden vehicle acceleration" not caused by floor mats.

"We better just hope that they can get NHTSA (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration) to work with us in coming (up) with a workable solution that does not put us out of business," Miller wrote.

The e-mail was addressed to Katsuhiko Koganei, executive coordinator for corporate communications for Toyota Motor Sales U.S.A. Inc.

"I hate to break this to you but WE HAVE A tendency for MECHANICAL failure in accelerator pedals of a certain manufacturer on certain models," Miller's e-mail began with several words in capital letters.

In a memo earlier that day, Koganei wrote Mike Michels, vice president of external communications, "Now I talked with you on the phone, we should not mention about the mechanical failures of acc. pedal because we have not clarified the real cause of the sticking acc pedal formally, and the remedy for the matter has not been confirmed."

Koganei further wrote that Toyota executives were concerned that news of the mechanical failures "might raise another uneasiness of customers."

The subject line said the e-mail was in regard to a draft statement to respond to an ABC News story.

Toyota, in a statement, said it "does not comment on internal company communications" and declined comment on Miller's e-mail. But the automaker said: "We have publicly acknowledged on several occasions that the company did a poor job of communicating during the period preceding our recent recalls."

"We have subsequently taken a number of important steps to improve our communications with regulators and customers on safety-related matters to ensure that this does not happen again," Toyota said, adding that it appointed a chief quality officer for North America and a greater role in the region for making safety-related decisions.

Miller, reached by phone at his home in Los Angeles, said he had no comment. His retirement was announced by Toyota on Dec. 16 and his retirement was effective Feb. 1.

The Transportation Department has assessed a record $16.4 million fine on Toyota for failing to alert the U.S. government to the safety problems about the sticking accelerator pedals quickly enough. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said Tuesday that Toyota made a "huge mistake" by not disclosing the safety problems sooner.

Concerns about sticking gas pedals and complaints from Toyota owners in the U.S. were rising at the end of 2009, according to documents obtained by the AP.

Distributors throughout Europe and in Russia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Turkey and Israel received the technical information.

In mid-January, Toyota held internal meetings "to discuss status of production changes and to prepare for meetings with NHTSA" on Jan. 19, according to the timeline. Two days later, Toyota announced it would recall 2.3 million vehicles to address the sticking pedals.

The documents obtained by the AP were among 70,000 pages of papers turned over to government investigators.

Toyota has recalled more than 6 million vehicles in the U.S. and a total of more than 8 million worldwide because of acceleration problems in multiple models and braking issues in the Prius hybrid.

The Japanese automaker was still weighing its options Wednesday about whether to accept or contest the fine. It has also been named in 138 potential class-action lawsuits over falling vehicle values and nearly 100 personal injury and wrongful

death cases in federal courts.

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