

## LaHood: More Fines Possible For Toyota

Jay Alabaster, Associated Press Writer

TOYOTA, Japan (AP) — U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said Monday that Washington wants to see results from Toyota's efforts to improve safety, and more fines would be imposed if needed.

"If a fine is required, I think everyone recognizes now that safety is our number one priority, and we will do all that we can to uphold the laws in our country," he said.

LaHood, speaking at the automaker's headquarters in its namesake city in central Japan, said he was pleased with measures Toyota Motor Corp. has taken to improve its communication with U.S. regulators, but was waiting to see if they are effective.

He spoke after meeting with Toyota President Akio Toyoda to discuss how the carmaker has revamped its business during its ongoing recall crisis.

LaHood repeatedly emphasized that he wanted to see more progress from Toyota, saying the measures so far are important, but that he told Toyoda "the proof is in the pudding."

The world's largest car manufacturer has recalled more than 8 million vehicles worldwide — most in the U.S. — for safety lapses affecting some of its top-selling models. The company still faces hundreds of state and federal lawsuits in the U.S. and recently paid a record \$16.4 million U.S. government fine because of a four-month delay in telling authorities about defective gas pedals. Toyota's sweeping recalls have triggered the first major review of U.S. auto safety laws in Congress since tire recalls by Bridgestone/Firestone Inc. in 2000.

Toyoda said he believed his company was making "strong progress" on its commitments to strengthen safety measures and increase communication between the company's broad operations.

"We are giving our local regions a greater role in making safety decisions and we are sharing information across regions on a more timely basis," he said.

One complaint against Toyota has been that it was slow to address safety issues in the U.S. because of communication lags with its Japanese headquarters.

LaHood told U.S. reporters in a conference call that the government was reviewing 500,000 Toyota documents to determine whether the company should face another fine.

"We probably won't know that for a couple of months," he said.

Toyoda also said he would be traveling to the U.S. soon as part of the company's

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Published on Industrial Maintenance & Plant Operation (<http://www.impomag.com>)

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safety improvement efforts, but emphasized that the trip would not be to testify before Congress.

LaHood said he urged Toyoda to return to the United States in the fall to meet with members of Congress in Washington and to discuss the company's safety efforts with American consumers.

Earlier this year, company executives including Toyoda were called to testify before U.S. legislators.

Toyoda said he had promised the carmaker's full support in U.S. investigations into electronics systems in Toyota vehicles, which are being examined as a possible cause of sudden acceleration. Washington is also employing scientists from NASA in that effort.

LaHood's visit came as Washington and Tokyo seek to ease political tension over Toyota's safety woes. Last month his counterpart, Japanese Transport Minister Seiji Maehara, visited the U.S. and said he appreciated the "fair and equal treatment" of the automaker by U.S. regulators.

LaHood said Monday that a budgetary increase requested by President Barack Obama would allow the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to add 67 new positions.

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Lawmakers are debating doing away with a cap on fines against automakers that are slow in recalling vehicles. Toyota's \$16.4 million fine was the maximum currently allowed.

They are also considering new legal requirements for event data recorders, or black boxes similar to those in airplanes, in new vehicles and brake override systems, as well as adding a fee to each vehicle sold to support government safety research.

LaHood's trip to Toyota City took place a day before the company is due to release earnings for one of the toughest years since it was founded in 1937.

Despite the safety problems and a stagnant global economy, Toyota forecasts a return to the black for the last fiscal year that ended in March, aiming for an 80 billion yen (\$873 million) profit. It booked a 437 billion yen loss, its worst red ink ever, in the previous year.

The company's sales have been gradually recovering, fueled in part by large incentives in the U.S.

On his current visit to Japan, LaHood said he will also meet with executives from Honda Motor Co. and Nissan Motor Co. On Tuesday he is scheduled to visit a train research facility in central Japan and take a test ride on a high speed magnetically

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levitated, or maglev, train.

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*Associated Press Writer Ken Thomas in Washington contributed to this report.*

**Source URL (retrieved on 04/21/2015 - 8:38am):**

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