Toyota Learns To Take Its Time With New Vehicles

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TOYOTA, Japan (AP) — Toyota Motor Corp. is extending the time it takes to develop new vehicles by about four weeks for more quality checks in the wake of its massive safety-related recalls, a top executive said Wednesday.

Executive Vice President Takeshi Uchiyamada said the company has learned a lot from its recalls of more than 8.5 million vehicles worldwide, including the need to slow the pace at which it develops new cars.

It currently takes Toyota about 24 months on average to bring a new vehicle to market in Japan, Uchiyamada said. The time varies somewhat in other markets, including the U.S.

Uchiyamada, one of Toyota's highest-ranking officials who is considered the father of the automaker's popular Prius hybrid, made the remarks during a press event with U.S. media at the company's headquarters in its namesake city in central Japan.

Toyota has been reeling after its recalls, which bruised its vaunted reputation for quality and dented its market share in the U.S., its biggest market. The company's largest recalls stemmed from unintended acceleration related to faulty gas pedals and floor mats. In recent months, the automaker has recalled hundreds of thousands of other vehicles, including a recall announced Monday to fix an engine problem in its Lexus luxury cars that could cause stalling.

Toyota executives have acknowledged that the company expanded too quickly in the U.S. before its recalls. Company officials said Wednesday that the automaker has taken a host of steps to beef up its quality controls since then.

For example, Toyota has 1,000 people devoted to quality control as of late March, an increase of about 50 percent. In addition, the company has created a 100-person team devoted to incorporating customer feedback into vehicle development. It has also added a new layer of managers to help train and instruct engineers.

Toyota has been criticized for taking too long to recall vehicles and is working to move more quickly to address quality problems as they crop up. The automaker was hit with a record $16.4 million fine in the United States for responding too slowly when the recall crisis erupted.

The company still faces more than 200 lawsuits in the U.S. related to accidents involving defective cars, the drop in its stock price and the reduced resale value of its vehicles. The U.S. government has said unintended acceleration in Toyota

vehicles may be linked to the deaths of 93 people over the past decade.

The recall announced Monday of 270,000 Lexus vehicles worldwide will replace valve springs, a crucial engine component, that are flawed and could cause stalling in some models.

The company said earlier this week that it knew about the problem for two years and began fixing the problem in newly produced models. Only recently did it think a recall was warranted as complaints began to mount.

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