

Toyota Recalls 1.7 Million Vehicles

TOKYO (AP) — Toyota recalled nearly 1.7 million cars worldwide Wednesday for fuel leaks, the latest in a ballooning number of quality problems that could add another dent to its tarnished reputation in the crucial U.S. market.

Toyota's latest recalls are mostly in Japan, but they also include the IS and GS Lexus luxury models in North America, where the world's No. 1 automaker faces the biggest obstacles to winning back customer trust.

Toyota's U.S. sales lagged last year despite an industry recovery, putting General Motors Co. within reach of reclaiming its title as the world's biggest car maker by number of vehicles sold. Toyota Motor Corp. became the top-selling automaker in 2008, dethroning GM after nearly 80 years of dominance.

There were no accidents suspected of being related to the latest recall, according to Toyota. The car maker said it had received 77 complaints overseas, 75 of them in North America, and more than 140 in Japan.

Koji Endo, auto analyst with Advanced Research Japan Co. in Tokyo, said the latest recall will cost Toyota about 20 billion yen (\$240 million), and that won't hurt its earnings performance by much.

"But there is that perception of here we go again, and that hurts Toyota's image, especially in North America," he said.

Toyota is likely trying to be aggressive with recalls, carrying them out quickly before they turn into bigger problems, and so the latest one is not a sign that quality is taking another plunge for the worse at the automaker, Endo said.

Still, the manufacturer — whose "Toyota Way" production methods have been praised and emulated around the world — can't hope to claim to have put the problems behind it either.

The largest number of the affected vehicles was in Japan at nearly 1.3 million — the second-largest auto recall in the nation's history — and involving two different problems.

The biggest recall in Japan was in 2005, also by Toyota, when nearly 1.3 million Corolla cars were recalled for a faulty headlight switch and some other problems, according to the Japanese transport ministry.

The latest quality hitch comes on top of the spate of massive recalls that began in late 2009, mostly in North America and which now cover more than 12 million vehicles.

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Toyota has been struggling to regain its once solid reputation among buyers for producing reliable vehicles. The biggest damage to Toyota's image has been in the U.S. where its response was seen as dallying.

The recalls since late 2009 include defective floor mats and gas pedals that get stuck, some of them suspected of causing unintended acceleration or runaway vehicles.

In one of the problems announced Wednesday, an improper installation of a sensor to measure fuel pressure may cause the sensor to loosen as a result of engine vibration over time, and possibly cause fuel leakage, the company said. That problem also affects 280,000 Lexus cars sold abroad, 255,000 of them in North America and 10,000 in Europe.

Included under that recall are the 2006 through 2007 Lexus GS300/350, 2006 through early 2009 Lexus IS250, and 2006 through early 2008 Lexus IS350 sold in the U.S.

Lexus dealers will inspect the vehicles for fuel leakage and will tighten the fuel pressure sensor with the proper torque, if nothing is leaking. If a leak is confirmed, the gasket between the sensor and the delivery pipe will be replaced, it said.

That same problem was also found in the Crown and Mark X models sold in Japan.

The second problem, which affects 141,000 Avensis sedans and station wagons sold in Europe, and New Zealand, was caused by irregular work on the fuel pipe, which may cause cracks and fuel leakage, Toyota said.

That problem was also found in 16 models sold in Japan, including the Noah subcompact, RAV4 sport-utility vehicle and Wish cars.

Toyota also recalled 6,000 trucks made by group company Daihatsu Motor Co., which were sold under the Toyota brand in Japan, for a problem with a metal part attaching a spare tire to the bottom of the truck. The tire could come loose and fall on the road, Toyota said.

In December, Toyota agreed to pay \$32.4 million in fines to the U.S. government to settle the investigation into its handling of two recalls. The latest settlement was on top of the \$16.4 million fine Toyota paid earlier.

Toyota has stayed popular in Japan, partly because government incentives for green vehicles sent sales of its Prius gasoline-electric hybrid booming.

Chief Executive Akio Toyoda, the grandson of the automaker's founder, has vowed to regain trust and be quicker in responding to customer needs.

Toyota has held the spot of the world's biggest automaker in annual vehicle sales for three years straight, including last year though General Motors was close

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behind. But some believe that Toyota's relentless drive for growth hurt quality.

Toyota shares fell nearly 2 percent to close at 3,400 yen (\$41) in Tokyo.

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