Gov't: No Electronic Flaws Caused Toyota Crashes

Ken Thomas, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Electronic flaws weren't to blame for the reports of sudden, unintended acceleration that led to the recall of thousands of Toyota vehicles, the government said Tuesday.

Some of the acceleration cases could have been caused by mechanical defects — sticking accelerator pedals and gas pedals that can become trapped in floor mats — that have been dealt with in recalls, the government said.

And in some cases, investigators suggested, drivers simply hit the gas when they meant to press the brake.

"We feel that Toyota vehicles are safe to drive," declared Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood.

The investigation bolstered Toyota's contentions that electronic gremlins were not to blame and its series of recalls — involving more than 12 million vehicles globally since fall 2009 — had directly addressed the safety concerns.

Transportation officials, assisted by engineers with NASA, said the 10-month study of Toyota vehicles concluded there was no electronic cause of unintended high-speed acceleration. The study, launched at the request of Congress, responded to consumer complaints that flawed electronics could be the culprit behind complaints that led to Toyota's spate of recalls.

Recalls to fix sticking accelerator pedals, gas pedals that became trapped in floor mats, and other safety issues have posed a major challenge for the world's No. 1 automaker, which has scrambled to protect its reputation for safety and reliability. Toyota paid the U.S. government a record $48.8 million in fines for its handling of three recalls.

Toyota said the report should "further reinforce confidence in the safety of Toyota and Lexus vehicles" and "put to rest unsupported speculation" about the company's electronic throttle control systems, which are "well-designed and well-tested to ensure that a real world, un-commanded acceleration of the vehicle cannot occur."

Toyota reported a 39 percent slide in quarterly profit earlier Tuesday but raised its full-year forecasts for earnings and car sales. The financial results and government report boosted shares of the automaker on Wall Street by more than 4 percent, to close at $88.57.

Analysts said the report would help Toyota's reputation but the company would still need to work hard to regain its bulletproof image of reliability. Toyota was the only major automaker to see a U.S. sales decline last year at 0.4 percent.

"This is really something that is going to take years and years to recover," said Rebecca Lindland, director of automotive research with consulting firm IHS Automotive.

Federal officials said they thoroughly examined the acceleration reports and could not find evidence of an electronic problem. Instead, investigators with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said the evidence showed that cases in which owners complained about ineffective brakes were most likely caused by "pedal misapplication," in which the driver stepped on the accelerator instead of the brakes.

Many of the complaints involved cases in which the vehicle accelerated after it was stationary or at very low speed.

LaHood said NASA engineers "rigorously examined" nine Toyotas driven by consumers who complained of unintended acceleration. NASA reviewed 280,000 lines of software code to look for flaws that could cause the acceleration. Investigators tested mechanical components in Toyotas that could lead to the problem and bombarded vehicles with electro-magnetic radiation to see whether that could make the electronics cause the cars to speed up.

Electronic problems can include buggy software, circuitry influenced by electrical interference and electrical shorts. The problems are often difficult to spot and can surface when combined with environmental factors like a blast from a heater vent or moisture from the road.

A preliminary part of the study, released last August, failed to find any electronic flaws based on a review of event data recorders, or vehicle black boxes.

Not everyone was convinced. Rhonda Smith, of Sevierville, Tennessee, who last year testified before a congressional committee that her Lexus raced up to 100 miles per hour without her control, said Tuesday there had to be a cause other than floor mats or sticky gas pedals because she said neither happened in her case.

"There is a defect in that car whether they want to believe it or not," Smith said. "They need to keep searching."

NHTSA administrator David Strickland, however, told reporters that the agency conducted extensive tests on Smith's vehicle and found "no other vulnerabilities" beyond trapped floor mats.

Consumer advocates and safety groups have raised concerns that flawed electronics could be causing unwanted acceleration in the Toyotas. They have questioned the reliability of the event data recorders studied by the government, saying they could be faulty or fail to tell the whole story of the individual crashes.

Joan Claybrook, a former NHTSA administrator who previously led consumer group Public Citizen, said the government investigation discounted research conducted by

plaintiffs' attorneys.

"The facts are still quite substantial that there's a problem and I think they could have done a lot more in terms of gathering more expertise," Claybrook said.

To promote safety, LaHood said NHTSA was considering new regulations. They include requiring brake override systems on all vehicles, standardizing keyless ignition systems and requiring event data recorders, or vehicle black boxes, on all new vehicles.

Transportation officials said they would also consider conducting more research on electronic control systems and review the placement and design of accelerator and brake pedals.

Since the recalls, Toyota has installed brake override systems on new vehicles. The systems automatically cut the throttle when the brake and gas pedals are applied at the same time.

The company also created engineering teams to examine vehicles that are the subject of consumer complaints and appointed a chief quality officer for North America amid complaints its U.S. division did not play a large enough role in making safety decisions.

Toyota's safety issues received broad attention from the government after four people were killed in a high-speed crash involving a Lexus near San Diego in August 2009.

NHTSA has received about 3,000 reports of sudden acceleration incidents involving Toyota vehicles during the past decade, including allegations of 93 deaths. NHTSA has confirmed five of them.

Congress considered sweeping safety legislation last year that would have required brake override systems, raised penalties on auto companies that evade safety recalls and given the government the power to quickly recall vehicles. But the bills failed to win enough support.

The National Academy of Sciences is conducting a separate study of unintended acceleration in cars and trucks across the auto industry. The panel is expected to release its findings this fall.

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AP Auto Writers Tom Krisher and Sharon Carty in Detroit contributed to this report.

Toyota trying to move beyond safety concerns

WASHINGTON (AP) — Toyota Motor Corp., which built its reputation in America on safety and reliability, has been cleared by the U.S. government of electronic problems in its vehicles. Now it needs to convince consumers that it has put its

safety recalls in the rear view mirror.

The Transportation Department said Tuesday that electronic flaws were not to blame for reports of sudden, unintended acceleration. Since 2009, Toyota has recalled more than 12 million vehicles globally over safety problems. The government's new findings bolstered Toyota's contention that the company had directly dealt with the problems through its recalls and is making safety paramount in its lineup.

Analysts said it would take more than a government report to repair Toyota's once pristine image for producing quality vehicles. Toyota was the only major automaker to see a U.S. sales decline last year at 0.4 percent and saw its U.S. market share fall nearly 2 percentage points to 15.2 percent. The decline came even though total U.S. sales rose 11 percent for the year.

"This is really something that is going to take years and years to recover," said Rebecca Lindland, director ofautomotive research with consulting firm IHS Automotive.

Toyota has wrestled with recalls to fix sticking accelerator pedals, gas pedals that became trapped in floor mats and other safety issues, forcing the world's No. 1 automaker to scramble to protect its reputation. Toyota paid the U.S. government a record $48.8 million in fines for its handling of three recalls.

Toyota said the government report should "further reinforce confidence in the safety of Toyota and Lexus vehicles" and "put to rest unsupported speculation" about the company's electronic throttle control systems, which are "well-designed and well-tested to ensure that a real world, uncommanded acceleration of the vehicle cannot occur." The company said it was "focused on listening to our customers and constantly improving our products and service."

Transportation officials, helped by NASA engineers, said the 10-month study of Toyota vehicles concluded the acceleration cases could have been caused by mechanical defects already covered by recalls and suggested in some cases drivers hit the gas when they intended to press the brakes. The study, launched at the request of Congress, responded to consumer complaints that flawed electronics could be the culprit behind incidents that led to Toyota's spate of recalls.

The automaker faces hundreds of lawsuits over alleged unwanted acceleration. Some consumer groups said the study was limited in its reach, and they would continue to press the company over safety. "We don't think the story's over — not by a long shot," said Sean Kane, founder of Safety Research & Strategies Inc., a Massachusetts-based firm that has studied Toyota's recalls.

Steve Berman, an attorney for plaintiffs in a class-action lawsuit against Toyota, said the report's findings were "in stark contrast to what Toyota drivers across the country experienced — and continue to experience — even after the series of recalls." He said there were too many reports of unwanted acceleration in vehicles fixed under the recall to eliminate electronics.

Other automakers have faced similar problems in the past. Audi dealt with a spate of unintended acceleration problems with its 5000 sedan in the late 1980s. The car was recalled after complaints that it would suddenly accelerate when shifted from park to drive or reverse. NHTSA found that most of the incidents were caused by drivers putting their feet on the wrong pedals.

Audi's U.S. sales bottomed out in 1991 at just over 12,000 vehicles, but the German automaker has made strides with sporty luxury vehicles. Last year the company sold 101,629 vehicles nationwide, according to Ward's AutoInfoBank.

David Champion, senior director of auto testing for Consumer Reports magazine, said questions about Toyota's reliability first started to surface in the magazine's annual subscriber survey in 2007. In last year's survey, Champion said, Toyota had some vehicles drop to below average in reliability for the first time in decades.

"I do think they lost direction in some ways," Champion said. "It'll be interesting to see how they change direction and go back to what they're good at: building somewhat boring in some ways but very efficient and very reliable sedans that people want to buy."

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AP auto writers Tom Krisher and Sharon Carty in Detroit contributed to this report.

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