

GM To Buy Back Volts

Tom Krisher, AP Auto Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — General Motors will buy Chevrolet Volts back from any owner who is afraid the electric cars will catch fire, the company's CEO said Thursday.

In an exclusive interview with The Associated Press, CEO Dan Akerson insisted that the cars are safe, but said the company will purchase the Volts because it wants to keep customers happy. Three fires have broken out in Volts after side-impact crash tests done by the federal government.

Akerson said that if necessary, GM will recall the more than 6,000 Volts now on the road in the U.S. and repair them once the company and federal safety regulators figure out what caused the fires.

"If we find that is the solution, we will retrofit every one of them," Akerson said. "We'll make it right."

The fires happened seven days to three weeks after tests performed by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. And GM has said there's no threat of fires immediately after crashes. GM also has said that no Volts involved in real-world crashes have caught fire.

Still, NHTSA has opened an investigation into the fires and has asked other companies that make electric cars for battery testing data. NHTSA said the safety testing hasn't raised concerns about electric vehicles other than the Volt.

"The fire broke out seven days later. Not seven minutes. Not seven seconds," Akerson said, adding that the company wants to fix the problem so people continue to have faith in Volts and other advanced technology cars. The company is notified of any Volt crash through its OnStar safety system and dispatches a team with 48 hours to drain the battery, preventing fires, he said.

"I think in the interest of General Motors, the industry, the electrification of the car, it's best to get it right now than when you have — instead of 6,000 — 60,000 or 600,000 cars on the road," he said.

The NHTSA testing, Akerson said, intruded into the Volt's battery pack by four to five inches, beyond the normal testing standard of about two inches. Then the cars were rotated 360 degrees to simulate a rollover crash. He said anytime there's a new technology introduced like the Volt, problems will arise. GM is dedicated to fixing them.

He conceded that the fires may cause some potential buyers to shy away from the Volt. But he added that GM is trying to get the message out that they happened only after extreme tests. Akerson also stressed that standard gas engine cars also

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have problems with fires after crashes.

The Volt can go about 35 miles on battery power before a small gasoline generator kicks in to keep the car running. The car can be recharged with a standard home electrical outlet.

The Nissan Leaf, a fully electric car and the Volt's main competitor, has not had any similar fires after crash tests or real-world crashes, Nissan said.

The Leaf battery is cooled by air rather than a liquid used to cool the Volt battery.

Akerson said investigators are looking at spilled coolant as one possible cause of the fires, although he said the coolant itself did not catch fire. Investigators are looking at everything from circuit boards to the way the battery cells are packaged into the Volt's larger T-shaped battery pack, he said.

Investigators have some promising leads but no conclusions yet, Akerson said.

GM doesn't expect many Volt owners to return their cars, given feedback from customers thus far, said spokesman Rob Peterson.

Earlier this week GM offered loaner cars to all Volt owners until the cause of the fires is found and fixed. So far, Akerson said 16 Volt owners have inquired and only two have taken the loaners.

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