

Hail Storm Pounds New Ford Escape Models

Christopher S. Rugaber, AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — A vicious hail storm last month pounded thousands of Ford's popular new Escape SUVs as they awaited shipment to U.S. car dealerships. But the damage won't slow the roll-out of the new, highly anticipated model, the company said Sunday.

The storm struck Louisville, Ky., April 28 and damaged about 3,500 Escapes, according to a report in the Louisville Courier-Journal. The cars are assembled at a nearby plant.

The same storm disrupted horse races at Churchill Downs during a trial race for the Kentucky Derby.

Todd Nissen, a Ford spokesman, would not confirm the number of cars that were damaged because the process of inspecting each vehicle is "a fairly time-consuming process."

Earlier this month, Ford said that it was increasing production at a number of plants and would build another 40,000 vehicles this year. Ford's sales are up 5 percent this year.

One of the plants adding a week of production was the Louisville Assembly in Louisville, which produces the Ford Escape.

It's a crucial release for the carmaker.

Sales of the Ford Explorer SUV hit a four-year high after a redesign and the company hopes to reproduce that success with a long overdue makeover of the Ford Escape. The vehicle's boxy profile had become stale compared with rivals, like the Chevrolet Equinox.

The SUVs at the site had been undergoing final quality checks when the storm hit, Nissen said. Damaged units won't be sold to the public as new cars, he said.

"The vehicles continue to be made and shipped to the dealerships," Nissen said in an interview.

U.S. auto sales rose to an annual rate of 14 million in the first four months of the year, up from 12.8 million last year.

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