Feds Probe Ford Escapes For Sticky Throttles

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DETROIT (AP) — Government safety regulators are investigating complaints that throttles can stick on older-model Ford Escape and Mazda Tribute SUVs and cause them to crash.

The probe, announced Tuesday by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, affects 730,000 SUVs from the 2001 to 2004 model years that are powered by V-6 engines.

The safety agency said it has received 99 complaints from owners of the SUVs alleging 13 crashes, nine injuries and one death caused by the problem. The throttles on the SUVs can fail to return to idle when the driver takes his foot off the gas pedal, according to agency documents.

Sixty-eight of the complaints were about the Escape, and 31 involved the Tribute, a nearly identical vehicle made by Ford for Mazda. Dearborn, Michigan-based Ford used to own about one-third of Mazda. But Ford began cutting ties in 2008, and in 2010 lowered its ownership to 3.5 percent.

Investigators are looking into whether the sticky throttles could have been caused by repairs made as part of a 2004 recall of the same vehicles. About 590,000 of the vehicles were recalled in December of 2004 to fix an accelerator cable defect, and the documents say the repairs could have damaged the cruise control cable.

Ford spokeswoman Marcey Zwiebel said Ford is aware of the investigation but won't comment on specifics.

"We will fully cooperate, as we always do, with NHTSA," she said.

The Escape has been one of Ford's most popular vehicles since it went on sale in 2000, with more than 2.1 million sold. It was the top-selling small SUV in the country in three of the four years covered by the recall. It was outsold by the Honda CR-V in 2002.

The investigation is among the larger probes started by NHTSA in 2012. While many affect fewer than 100,000 vehicles, the agency this year began looking into door fires affecting 1.4 million Toyota Camry midsize sedans and RAV4 small SUVs. It also expanded a fuel tank fire probe in older-model Jeep Grand Cherokee SUVs to include 5.1 million vehicles.

NHTSA investigations are the first step toward a recall, but they don't always cause cars and trucks to go back to dealerships for repairs.

The investigation comes just over a week after the Center for Auto Safety, a

Washington, D.C., advocacy group petitioned NHTSA to investigate the Escape and Tribute problems. The group also asked for a hearing to decide whether Ford and Mazda met obligations to notify owners and fix defects in their vehicles. NHTSA can fine automakers if it finds they didn't notify owners in a timely manner.

But NHTSA denied the group's petition, saying it believes it can gather all the information it needs without a hearing and that a hearing could distract from its investigation. NHTSA said it has been looking at Escape and Tribute problems since early in 2012, after the driver of a 2002 Escape was killed in a crash in Payson, Arizona, in January.

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