

## Ford To Recall 485,000 SUVs To Fix Throttles

Tom Krisher, AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — Ford is recalling nearly 485,000 Escape SUVs to fix sticking gas pedals that can cause crashes.

The worldwide recall covers Escapes from the 2001 through 2004 model years that are powered by 3-liter V-6 engines with cruise control. It comes just over a week after U.S. safety regulators began investigating the small SUVs.

The U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has received 68 complaints about the problem, including 13 crashes, nine injuries and one death. A teenage girl died when an Escape crashed in Arizona in January.

It's the third recall in just two weeks for the Escape, which was the top-selling SUV in the U.S. last month. A week ago Ford recalled 11,500 of the all-new 2013 models with 1.6-liter engines because the fuel lines can crack and leak gasoline, causing fires. A few days before that, it recalled 10,000 2013 Escapes to fix carpet padding that could interfere with braking.

On the older Escapes, which are completely different from the 2013 models, the cruise control cables can snag on the plastic cover atop the engine and cause the gas pedals to stick, Ford said. For the problem to happen, the pedals must be pushed to or near the floor, and the cruise control cables must have been bent or moved from their original position, Ford spokeswoman Marcey Zwiebel said. Cable positions can be changed when the SUVs are serviced, she noted.

"This is not a situation where the engine would accelerate or go into a wide-open state on its own," she said.

Dealers will replace the fasteners on the engine cover, raising it so there's plenty of room for the cruise control cable. Zwiebel said it will take a few weeks to distribute the parts. In the meantime, Escape owners can take their vehicles to dealers, who will disconnect the cruise control and eliminate the risk of the problem happening, Zwiebel said.

On July 17, NHTSA announced that it was investigating complaints about sticky throttles on Escapes and Mazda Tributes. Tributes are identical vehicles built by Ford for Mazda. It was unclear whether Tributes would be recalled.

NHTSA said investigators would look into whether the sticky throttles could have been caused by repairs made as part of a 2004 recall. About 590,000 Escapes and Tributes were recalled in December of 2004 to fix an accelerator cable defect, and NHTSA documents say the repairs could have damaged the cruise control cable.

The agency said late Thursday that the Escape investigation remains open until it

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can review Ford's recall documents.

While Ford said it moved quickly to fix the cruise control problem, Clarence Ditlow, executive director of the Center for Auto Safety, a consumer group, accused the company of knowing about the issue since 2005, but failing to take action until the government began its investigation.

Some Ford dealers had told the company that cruise control cables were damaged during 2004 recall repairs, but Ford did not know until recently that the damage could cause throttles to stick, Zwiebel said.

The Escape has been one of Ford's most popular vehicles since it went on sale in 2000. More than 2.1 million have been sold. It was the top-selling small SUV in the country in three of the four years covered by the recall.

The latest recall affects 421,000 Escapes in the U.S. The rest are in Canada, Mexico, Europe, Asia and some smaller markets.

Recalls can often be signs of quality problems in cars, especially if there are several during the first model year. Both recalls of the 2013 Escape, which just arrived in showrooms in June, occurred in the same week earlier this month.

Ford CEO Alan Mulally told reporters Wednesday that the company quickly recalled the 2013 Escape to take care of customers. "I wouldn't characterize it at all as a more fundamental issue in the quality," he said.

Two recalls in one week are unusual, but more likely a coincidence than a sign of quality problems, Ditlow said. He questions a vehicle's quality if it has three recalls in a year.

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