

Toyota To Recall Lexus SUVs To Fix Floor Mat

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DETROIT (AP) — Toyota's problems with runaway acceleration just won't go away.

Three years after the company recalled its first cars to fix the problem, it has identified two more models at risk, the 2010 Lexus RX 350 and RX 450H SUVs.

Toyota said Friday it will recall 154,000 of the luxury SUVs because their floor mats can trap the gas pedal and cause the SUVs to speed up without warning. U.S. safety regulators, who asked Toyota to recall the vehicles, may investigate whether the company reported the problem fast enough.

Toyota's action adds to a string of embarrassing safety recalls that began in 2009. The Japanese automaker has recalled more than 14 million vehicles globally to fix problems including sticky gas pedals and floor mats. The recalls tarnished the company's sterling reputation for reliability and cut into sales. Toyota says it thought the acceleration problem had been solved when it began selling the SUVs.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration sought the latest recall after reviewing complaints from customers and information from the company. The agency does not believe any additional Toyota vehicles have the same problem.

If NHTSA decides to open an investigation, it wouldn't be the first dustup between Toyota and the agency. In 2010 and 2011, Toyota paid a record \$48.8 million in fines to the government for failing to promptly alert regulators to safety problems.

Toyota spokesman Brian Lyons said the company is cooperating with NHTSA and provided information in a timely manner after investigators asked for it.

Owners of the Lexus SUVs should take out the driver's side floor mat and have their vehicles serviced as quickly as possible, NHTSA said.

They will be notified of the problem by mail in early August, and dealers will fix it for free, Toyota said.

Experts say if your car accelerates unexpectedly, you should step on the brake and shift into neutral, steer safely to the roadside and shut off the engine.

Toyota's string of unintended acceleration recalls occurred in 2009 and 2010, raising suspicions about Toyota's electronic throttle controls. NHTSA brought in scientists from NASA to help investigate, finding nothing wrong with the electronics in a probe that ended early in 2011. NHTSA said at the time recalls for sticky gas pedals and floor mats would take care of unintended acceleration.

The recalls hit nearly all of Toyota's models at some point during the crisis,

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everything from the Tundra pickup to its most popular cars, the Camry and Corolla.

Although Friday's recall comes years after the Lexus SUVs were introduced, a NHTSA spokeswoman said the agency had no data to seek a recall before that.

By the time the Lexus SUVs went on sale in late 2009, the company thought it had solved any acceleration problem with a new mat design, Toyota's Lyons said.

"It had a newer, thinner, more pliable all-weather floor mat," he said.

In a study of complaints, Toyota found that the new mats worked without problems as long as they were secured properly and other mats weren't stacked on top of them, Lyons said.

Still, the company will trim the size of the gas pedal to make more room between it and the floor to avoid future problems, he said.

When NHTSA closed its Toyota unintended acceleration probe in 2011, there were no complaints about the RX 350 from model years 2008 and 2009, and only three complaints from the 2010 model year, agency spokeswoman Lynda Tran said. There also were no complaints about the RX 450 H gas-electric hybrid.

But government investigators noticed an increase in complaints about the Lexus SUVs late last month, and they asked Toyota about the problem. Last week, Toyota told the agency that it had a "significant volume" of complaints about the same issue, so NHTSA asked for the recall, the agency said in a statement.

Now, NHTSA has asked Toyota for more documentation to see if the company "met its obligation to notify the agency and conduct a recall in a timely manner," NHTSA said.

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