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Subject: ES 350 AWFM Article - FYI.

Please be advised that the following article was published earlier today. This is the first of many stories on the ES 350 AWFM investigation.

Lexus safety probe widens

By Justin Hyde

Detroit Free Press

(MCT)

WASHINGTON — Federal regulators have stepped up an investigation into 98,454 Lexus ES 350 sedans after amassing 40 reports of unintended acceleration, including eight crashes and 12 injuries, along with cases in which drivers said their cars stopped only after an accident.

Toyota Motor Co. told safety officials that the problem appeared to be caused by loose floor mats and contends that it dealt with the flaw through a mailing to customers earlier this year. But the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration decided to continue its investigation last week to verify whether Toyota's efforts were sufficient.

Sudden acceleration problems carry a unique stigma in the U.S. auto industry, due to the collapse of the Audi brand in the late 1980s following a "60 Minutes" report alleging runaway vehicles. Federal safety officials later cleared Audi, but it took years for the company to clear its name with customers.

While some auto safety advocates maintain that several models still suffer from sudden acceleration, NHTSA has investigated hundreds of such complaints over the past two decades but rarely found any defects. Most of the complaints have been blamed on drivers mistaking the accelerator for the brake.

But in the Lexus investigation, NHTSA verified several of the complaints. One driver told the agency the vehicle had hit speeds of 100 mph over a 6-mile stretch of freeway due to the problem. A Michigan woman said the problem caused her to lose control of her Lexus, triggering a rollover crash that totaled her car. NHTSA does not release the names of people who file complaints.

NHTSA found an all-season floor mat that Lexus sold as an option in a majority of the cases it reviewed. The rubber mat was sold as a replacement for the standard mats and should be secured by clips to the car's carpet. If left unclipped and installed over the regular mats, it can slide under the accelerator pedal.

In its letter sent in April, after NHTSA launched its investigation, Toyota told owners to not use the mat on top of the regular floor mats, and reminded them to check for proper installation. It also sent an orange warning sticker that owners were supposed to attach to the underside of the all-season mat.

As an option, the ES 350 offers an engine start-stop button instead of a traditional key. Some drivers tried to shut off the engine by pressing the button as the car accelerated, but without success.

Toyota said that once the engine is running, owners must hold the button down for at least 3 seconds to shut it off in an emergency.

NHTSA's decision last week to upgrade its investigation to an

engineering analysis means that it will review Toyota's mailings and perhaps solicit information from other automakers. Lexus spokesman Greg Thome said that the company does not believe any safety defect exists with the ES 350 and that it was cooperating with NHTSA.

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