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Toyota denies Tacoma is defective

Media inspired acceleration claims, it says

BY JUSTIN HYDE • FREE PRESS WASHINGTON STAFF • June 10, 2008

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WASHINGTON -- Some 431 customers from around the country have reported unintended or sudden acceleration in their Toyota Tacoma pickups, resulting in 51 crashes and 12 injuries, but the automaker said there are no flaws in the trucks and that many reports were "inspired by publicity."

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Federal regulators are still weighing whether to upgrade the investigation launched in February, which has broadened to include 775,000 Tacomas sold between the 2004 and 2008 model years. That probe was spurred by a Tacoma owner who noted 32 complaints to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration over acceleration problems.

A deeper investigation could force Toyota to recall the trucks if officials find a defect, and raise questions about sudden-acceleration claims that safety regulators and automakers have blamed on driver error for years. It could also address why no pickup model other than the Tacoma has garnered more than a few complaints of unexpected acceleration to the NHTSA during the same period.

Yet the NHTSA typically ends probes that don't uncover a clear fault in vehicles, and has previously ruled that without such evidence, driver error is an inescapable conclusion.

Toyota told the NHTSA last month that most of the claims to itself and the agency dealt with minor engine speed changes that have no relation to safety, and that its own investigation last October of 12 trucks reported to have sudden acceleration problems found no defects.

It also said "extensive media coverage" spurred additional reports and could explain why no other pickup has similar complaints.

"Toyota believes that it is likely that many of the consumer complaints about the general issue of unwanted acceleration ... as well as many of the complaints about this subject that have been received by Toyota, were inspired by publicity," Toyota said in a letter to the NHTSA released Thursday.

"But even taking them at face value, it is clear that the majority of the complaints are related to minor drivability issues and are not indicative of a safety-related defect."

That's not the way [redacted] sees it. A firefighter from Commerce Township, [redacted] owns a 2007 Tacoma that he said surged on him in January as he turned off his cruise control to exit a freeway.

[redacted] said he had to dodge a couple of vehicles as the truck's engine revved, despite having his foot on the brake, and that he was able to stop only by putting the truck in neutral gear, where the engine revved to the limit. The truck hasn't surged since, a dealer found nothing wrong, and [redacted] said he's taking Toyota to arbitration.

"I think about it constantly," said [redacted] who added that he had not heard of acceleration complaints with the Tacoma before his incident. "I don't use the cruise control, and I've got my hand on the shift knob all the time."

Toyota's explanation

The Tacoma uses a drive-by-wire system, where computer controls replace a direct physical connection between the accelerator pedal and the throttle. Toyota said its system was designed to report an error in case the accelerator pedal and throttle are mismatched, and that it has not found error codes in vehicles inspected either by technicians or mechanics at dealerships.

While Toyota told regulators that "extensive media coverage and Internet references" fueled the surge of reports, it doesn't offer specifics. The first local TV report of the problem came from a Nashville station in October 2007. According to data obtained by the Free Press, 403 of the 514 complaints Toyota reported to the NHTSA were received before then.

NHTSA records show that 18 complaints of sudden acceleration in Tacomas were made before then, with the earliest from February 2006. Media databases show no reporting in a U.S. newspaper about the problems until a Free Press story early this April.

Toyota spokesman Bill Kwong said tests by the automaker and the NHTSA revealed no problems that would explain the complaints. He said the problems were not as prevalent as the number of complaints suggested, saying the NHTSA asked for any cases where engine idle speed increased.

"We remain confident in the safety of the vehicles," Kwong said.

Action urged

[redacted], a retired journalist in Montana whose petition to the NHTSA spurred the investigation, said Toyota's explanation should force the NHTSA to look more closely at the Tacoma.

"The reasonable possibility of a safety-related defect should be the standard," [redacted] said in a letter to regulators Saturday. "And that possibility is supported."

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