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Investigators close Tacoma probe

Unintended acceleration not explained

BY JUSTIN HYDE • FREE PRESS WASHINGTON STAFF • SEPTEMBER 3, 2008

WASHINGTON -- Federal safety regulators have closed an investigation into unintended acceleration in Toyota Tacoma pickup trucks, saying their probe couldn't find a cause behind more than 400 complaints.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration last Wednesday denied a petition by a Tacoma owner who said his truck suffered two instances of sudden acceleration in January and noted 32 similar complaints to NHTSA. Toyota Motor Corp. told the agency earlier this year that 431 customers had complained of such events, including 51 crashes and 12 injuries.

But Toyota also had argued that many of the complaints were "inspired by publicity," and no flaws had been found in the truck. NHTSA's investigation covered 775,000 Tacomas built between the 2004 and 2008 model year.

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"For those vehicles where the throttle control system did not perform as the owner believes it should have, the information suggesting a possible defect related to motor vehicle safety is quite limited," the agency said in its notice. "Additional investigation is unlikely to result in a finding that a defect related to motor vehicle safety exists."

NHTSA typically ends probes that don't uncover a clear fault in vehicles. Over the past eight years, the agency has closed at least six other investigations into reports of unexpected or uncontrolled acceleration in vehicles without finding evidence of defects, and has said in the past that driver error is often the cause.

The agency said its investigators interviewed 64 customers who complained to the agency. In many of those cases, it said the complaints stemmed from engine controls that caused the Tacoma's engine to surge slightly, but would produce no or minimal extra power.

In 14 cases, investigators said loose floormats may have caused a problem, and in five cases found drivers had stepped on both the accelerator pedal and brake. But in 26 cases, including 13 crashes and four injuries, the agency found no explanation for the complaints.

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.

No pickup model other than the Tacoma has garnered more than a few complaints of sudden acceleration to the agency in recent years.

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.

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