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Floor mat suspected in fatal car crash

Accelerator could have become stuck

By Debbi Baker

UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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1

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A preliminary investigation into the fiery crash that killed a California Highway Patrol officer and three family members indicates it may have been caused by an accelerator trapped by a floor mat, said Sheriff's Department officials.

Audio

Hear the 911 call. Warning: Graphic content.

Witnesses saw flames coming from the front and rear tires of the speeding 2009 Lexus ES 350 before it crashed Aug. 28 in Santee, suggesting "long, constant heavy braking," said Sgt. Scott Hill, the lead sheriff's investigator.

Killed were CHP Officer [redacted] and his wife [redacted] both 45; their 13-year-old daughter, [redacted] and 38-year-old [redacted] all of Chula Vista. [redacted] was [redacted] brother.

In addition to the Sheriff's Department, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the CHP are part of the investigative team. NHTSA contacted the department after hearing about the crash and asked to assist in the investigation, Hill said yesterday. Investigators examined the wreckage of the luxury sedan and were able to recover the brakes, the accelerator and the floor mats from the badly burned vehicle, he said.

The car, a loaner from Bob Baker Lexus El Cajon, was equipped with "all-weather" floor mats, designed for Lexus vehicles made between 2004 and 2009, he said. Hill would not further elaborate on the mats or how they were installed.

All-weather mats installed in 2007 and 2008 models of the Lexus ES 350 were recalled by manufacturer Toyota in November 2007 due to complaints that, if not properly installed, the mats could slide forward and trap the gas pedal.

Hill explained that when the mat is not in the right position and the accelerator is pushed down, it becomes caught between ribs of the rubber mat and will not release.

Brian Lyons, vehicle safety and quality communication manager for Toyota USA, said yesterday that the all-weather mats, which are made of rubber, were redesigned at the time of the recall. He said the new mats from the manufacturer have a different shape and retaining system and are designed not to interfere with the gas pedal even if not properly clipped to the floor.

Lyons said the recalled rubber mats were made to use in place of the carpet mats, but some consumers incorrectly put them on top of the carpet mats.

According to the NHTSA recall report, there were incidents in which double mats led to sudden acceleration.

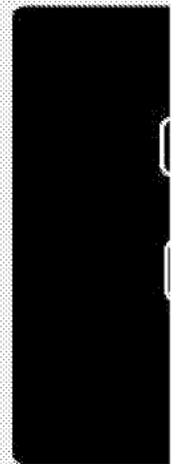
Hill, the Sheriff's Department investigator, said the Lexus in the accident did not have double mats.

Toyota sent letters to the registered owners of the 30,500 Lexus cars involved in the recall, asking them to return and replace the driver's side mats and said it would change the packaging of the mats to warn owners about improper installation.

Dave Ezratty, vice president of Bob Baker Lexus El Cajon, said yesterday that the dealer was refraining from commenting until the entire investigation is done.

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Hill said investigators are studying the burned Lexus, witness accounts, evidence from the crash scene and a 911 call made by back seat passenger Lastrella who reported that the car's accelerator was stuck and they could not stop. A full report should be complete in a few weeks, he said.

The car was northbound at about 120 mph on state Route 125 about 6:30 p.m., Hill said, when it entered a T-intersection with Mission Gorge Road. It clipped the rear corner of a Ford Explorer and then plowed over a curb and through a fence before hitting an embankment and going airborne. It rolled several times and then burst into flames.

Hill thinks [REDACTED], who was driving, started to experience problems with the accelerator sometime before he reached the Route 125 and Interstate 8 intersection, which is about five miles from Mission Gorge Road. Several people called to report that the car was seen speeding and weaving in and out of lanes with its emergency flashers on.

It was a matter of minutes between when the problem started and when the car ran off the road, Hill said, and [REDACTED] had to make a "split-second decision" to head straight into the intersection rather than to take the state Route 52 curve.

Investigators do not know if [REDACTED] tried to shift the car into neutral or if he tried to shut off the engine.

The NHTSA recall report from 2007 found that some Lexus drivers with stuck accelerators tried to turn off the car with the engine control button but didn't know the button must be held for three seconds. In addition, the report said that hitting the brakes multiple times depleted the car's vacuum-based power assist, making it more difficult to stop the car and possibly resulting in overheated brakes.

Hill said the evidence shows that there was prolonged "heavy, heavy, hard braking."

"(Saylor) did everything he could to stop that car," he said.

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