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Inspection order by Toyota linked to Santee crash

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UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITERS

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“We want to make sure everyone understands how important it is that the mat in the vehicle is made for that vehicle and is properly attached.”

BRIAN LYONS, Toyota spokesman

Toyota today will order its dealers to inspect the floor mats in all of their vehicles amid reports that a wrong-sized mat may have played a role in the recent Santee crash that killed four people in a runaway Lexus.

The unusual order from the world's largest automaker is being sent in a letter even though the accident is still under investigation. The letter will go to 1,400 U.S. dealers and applies to all new, used and loaner vehicles.

“We urge all other automakers, dealers, vehicle owners, and the independent service and car wash industries to assure that any floor mat, whether factory or aftermarket, is correct for the vehicle and properly installed and secured,” officials with Toyota Motor Sales USA said in a statement.

Auto-safety advocates, who have been studying sudden-acceleration incidents for decades, expressed skepticism about linking the mat to the crash, which killed veteran California Highway Patrol Officer [REDACTED] and three members of his family. They pointed to the complex electrical and computer systems in modern vehicles, which they said develop glitches and have caused thousands of similar accidents.

[REDACTED] was driving a 2009 Lexus ES 350, a loaner from Bob Baker Lexus El Cajon, when a passenger called 911 and told a dispatcher the accelerator was stuck and the vehicle was going 120 mph. It crashed shortly after near Mission Gorge Road and state Route 125.

Investigators with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said an all-weather mat found in the wreckage could have interfered with the accelerator, Toyota spokesman Brian Lyons said yesterday.

The mat was a couple of inches longer than the mat that belonged in the vehicle, Lyons said.

“The securing points would not allow that mat to be properly attached to the vehicle,” Lyons said. “If it is the mat we think it is, the holes would not line up with the clips.”

Two years ago, Toyota recalled its ridged, rubber, all-weather mats in the 2007 and early 2008 models of the Lexus ES 350 and Toyota Camry because of complaints that if not properly installed, the mats could slip forward and entrap the gas pedal.

Today's order for mandatory inspections is unusual, Lyons said, because the crash remains under investigation. But

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even if the final report doesn't cite the mat, it's still important to get the word out, he said.

“We want to make sure everyone understands how important it is that the mat in the vehicle is made for that vehicle and is properly attached,” Lyons said.

Toyota recommends that vehicle owners who have concerns check their floor mats to ensure that either the carpet or rubber mat is properly secured and clipped to the floor, Lyons said. Only one mat should be used at a time, never placed on another, he said.

Vehicles may also be taken to the dealers for inspection, Lyons said. The mats of any vehicle brought in for service will also be checked.

Sean Kane, president of Safety Research & Strategies, a Massachusetts consulting and advocacy firm, said floor mats could be a red herring in the Aug. 28 Santee accident.

“I don't know everything about the crash, but from what I've read and heard, it's hard to believe that this experienced driver, somebody with his credentials, and given the time involved between when the accelerator stuck and the crash — hard to believe that this is a floor-mat incident,” Kane said.

Saylor, who began his CHP career in 1989, worked at the downtown San Diego headquarters at the time of his death. As part of his administrative job, Saylor conducted safety inspections for armored trucks, tow trucks and ambulances.

His wife, [REDACTED] their 13-year-old daughter [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] who was [REDACTED] brother, died in the wreck.

Kane said his skepticism is also based on the history of sudden-acceleration problems with cars of various makes and models. “Floor mats have been the first, easy, go-to cause for investigators for far too long,” he said.

Clarence Ditlow, executive director of the Center for Auto Safety, a nonprofit advocacy group in Washington, D.C., co-authored a book in 2003 called “Sudden Acceleration” that tracked a proliferation of accidents and tied them to the increased use of electronic systems in vehicles.

“What we found is that random incidents of electromagnetic interference can interfere with the controls in the fuel system and open the throttle up,” Ditlow said.

Federal regulators examined sudden-acceleration cases in the 1980s and concluded that most could be blamed on driver error or mechanical malfunctions, such as slipped floor mats and jammed throttle cables.

Richard dePagter, a retired Carlsbad petroleum engineer, still doesn't know what caused his 2008 Lexus to speed up while he was driving south on Interstate 5 near Oceanside about four months ago.

DePagter said the car, which he had on cruise control, accelerated to about 90 mph. He turned off the cruise control and pumped the brakes, “but nothing happened.”

A passenger suggested turning off the engine by pushing the keyless ignition switch on the dashboard. He hit it once — not long enough to kill the engine — and shortly after that, the car began slowing.

DePagter said he took the car to a Lexus dealership, where mechanics inspected it and found nothing wrong. He had floor mats in the car, but not the all-weather kind linked to other accidents.

Still, after the crash in Santee, dePagter removed the mats from the driver's side of the car.

“I don't really believe a mat could do that,” he said. “But what happened was really scary. It's like you're trapped in a machine that somebody else is telling what to do.”

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