

Toyota recalls 3.8 million vehicles: Mats can cause stuck accelerators



BY JUSTIN HYDE - FREE PRESS WASHINGTON STAFF

WASHINGTON — Toyota Motor Co. is recalling 3.8 million Toyota and Lexus vehicles over sudden acceleration concerns, telling owners today to immediately remove driver's side floor mats that can stick under accelerator pedals.

The move is the largest safety-related recall Toyota has ever launched in the United States, and it's the sixth-largest auto recall ever in the United States.

The recall was spurred by a warning from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration telling drivers of the affected models to not replace the floor mats until Toyota finds a permanent fix.

Since 2004, Toyota owners have reported at least 30 crashes and 20 injuries involving uncontrolled acceleration to federal officials. In several cases, drivers said their vehicle accelerated to more than 100 m.p.h., despite stomping on the brake.

Last month, four people died in a crash near San Diego in a Lexus ES 350 that investigators suspected may have been caused by a stuck floor mat. Local media reported that in a call to 911, passengers reported the vehicle was accelerating out of control.

"This is an urgent matter," said U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood. "For everyone's sake, we strongly urge owners of these vehicles to remove mats or other obstacles that could lead to unintended acceleration."

The affected models include: 2007-10 Camry, 2005-10 Avalon, 2004-09 Prius, 2005-10 Tacoma, 2007-10 Tundra, 2007-10 Lexus ES 350, and 2006-10 Lexus IS 250 and IS 350.

Toyota's second floor mat recall

Along with the recall of 3.8 million vehicles, Toyota also warned owners what to do if they think their vehicle is accelerating out of control – a lesson that suggested the seriousness of the problem Toyota faces.

The recall is the second one Toyota has been forced to launch over the issue. The first, in 2007, covered 55,000 Camry and ES 350 models due to complaints of unintended acceleration caused by thick, all-weather floor mats sticking underneath the accelerator pedal.

In several of the original complaints, drivers said the vehicles stopped only after an accident. One driver told the agency the vehicle had hit speeds of 100 m.p.h. over a 6-mile stretch of freeway because of the problem.

At the time, Toyota told safety officials it had identified an optional all-weather floor mat that if not properly secured by clips to the floor could stick under the accelerator pedal. In some cases, Toyota said, owners put the rubber mat over the standard floor mats.

NHTSA said consumers continued to report instances of uncontrolled acceleration in Toyota models following that recall.

On Aug. 28, an off-duty California Highway Patrol officer was driving three family members in a Lexus ES 350 loaned by a San Diego dealership when the car went out of control and over an embankment, catching fire and killing all four passengers. In a 911 call, one of the passengers said the Lexus was speeding at 120 m.p.h., and witnesses said the car's tires were on fire when it crashed – possibly from the driver slamming on the brakes.

After the accident, Toyota ordered dealers to inspect all floor mats in new models.

Toyota spokesman Irv Miller said the automaker would tell owners to simply remove the driver's floor mat until Toyota found a permanent fix. If they don't, and they suspect their vehicle was surging out of control, they should check to see if their floor mat was under the pedal.

If they couldn't remove it, Toyota told drivers to:

- Step on the brake pedal with both feet until the vehicle slows.
- Try to put the transmission into neutral.
- Switch the ignition to accessory power.

For models with engine start/stop buttons, Toyota said the engine can be shut off by holding the button down for three seconds.

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