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Toyota to recall 3.8 million vehicles

Floor mats may slide, jam accelerator pedal

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The Detroit News

Washington -- Toyota Motor Corp. will recall more than 3.8 million Lexus and Toyota vehicles, its largest ever U.S. safety recall, after drivers reported that floor mats slid forward and in some cases jammed the accelerator pedal, the company and the U.S. government said Tuesday.

Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood and Toyota officials urged owners of seven vehicle lines, including Toyota's best-selling Camry sedan, its Tundra truck and three premium Lexus models, to immediately remove driver-side floor mats, particularly if they are not secured.

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

The impetus for the safety advisory, which will be followed by a recall, appears to be a crash in San Diego last month that killed four people riding in a Lexus ES 350. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, which sent investigators to review the wreckage, was preparing to open an investigation into the issue if Toyota hadn't agreed to the recall.

While the final accident report has not been issued, "there were some indications that there could be some floor mat involvement," Toyota spokesman Irv Miller said on a conference call.

The Japanese automaker will issue a recall once Toyota and U.S. safety officials determine how to address the problem. "This will be the largest in the U.S. for us," Miller said, exceeding Toyota's recall of more than 900,000 vehicles in 2005 to replace steering relay rods.

Toyota officials said they were unable at this stage to say how many accidents, injuries or deaths may have been caused by unsecured floor mats interfering with the gas pedal.

NHTSA has received reports of 102 incidents in Toyota vehicles from 2004-09 model years involving floor mats interfering with pedals. Forty-two, or more than a third of the incidents, involved the 2007 Lexus ES 350.

Toyota and NHTSA have not identified any other cause for the unintended acceleration that some drivers described, company officials said.

They said U.S. traffic safety investigators cited three potential issues: the use of unsecured mats in the seven affected model lines, the configuration of the pedals and, in some cases, the procedure to shut off the engine.

It's a big blow to Toyota, which is already struggling in the U.S. market with financial losses and weak sales. Toyota's U.S. auto sales are down 29 percent this year, slightly more than the market as a whole.

Toyota said it had received reports of mats interfering with gas pedals in Toyota Camry, Prius and Avalon cars, Tacoma and Tundra trucks, and Lexus ES 350, IS 250 and IS 350 models.

Sudden or unintended acceleration has been an issue for many automakers, said Sean Kane, president of Safety Research & Strategies in Rehoboth, Mass.

He said the NHTSA had received seven petitions to investigate sudden-acceleration complaints since 1999 and opened eight investigations into General Motors Co., Ford Motor Co., Toyota and Volkswagen models.

Toyota spokesman John Hanson said the company had received complaints, and the crash in San Diego "did prompt us to look closer at reports from the field of incidents such as this."

In that accident, Mark Saylor, an off-duty California Highway Patrol officer, and his wife, [redacted] both 45; their 13-year-old daughter, [redacted] and 38-year-old brother-in-law, [redacted] were killed on Aug. 28 after reporting to a 911 operator that they could not stop their 2009 Lexus ES 350 as it careened down Route 125 in Santee, Calif. In a tape of the call released this month, Lastrella told the operator the car had no brakes. It plunged over an embankment and burst into flames.

On Sept. 14, Toyota urged dealers to "immediately inspect their new, used, and loaner fleet vehicles and 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."

In September 2007, Toyota recalled an accessory all-weather floor mat sold for use in some 2007 and 2008 model year Lexus ES 350 and Toyota Camry cars because of similar problems.

NHTSA strongly recommended that drivers not replace the mats they remove with any other mat.

Other problems besides mats can cause unintended acceleration, including an electronic throttle control issue, Kane said. He said the NHTSA had opened 11 investigations into sudden acceleration issues at Toyota since 2003.

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Additional Facts

Affected vehicles

- 2007-10 Camry
- 2005-10 Avalon
- 2004-09 Prius
- 2005-10 Tacoma
- 2007-10 Tundra
- 2007-10 Lexus ES 350
- 2006-10 Lexus IS 250 and IS350
- For more information, consumers can contact NHTSA's hotline at (888) 327-4236, the Toyota Experience Center at (800) 331-4331 or the Lexus Customer Assistance Center at (800) 255-3987. Information from Toyota is also posted at www.toyota.com and www.lexus.com.

Source: Toyota Motor Corp.

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