

# Automotive News

## Airbag angst preceded U.S. demand for nationwide Takata recall

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(Bloomberg) -- The case of Kerry Mackin shows why the U.S. just demanded carmakers to recall cars with Takata Corp. airbags nationwide, even at the potential risk of endangering drivers who most urgently need replacements.

Alarmed by reports of fatal air-bag explosions, Mackin recently brought her 23-year-old daughter's 2003 Toyota Corolla to a nearby dealership, only to find it was ineligible for repairs. Massachusetts wasn't among the high-humidity areas covered by recalls of nearly 8 million cars the last two years.

"It doesn't make sense," said Mackin, 66, who lives north of Boston. "Anybody driving one of these cars is experiencing anxiety that the air bag might explode."

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reversed course Tuesday after months of allowing regional recalls, demanding that Takata and 10 automakers broaden their campaigns. Takata said the move could risk lives by aggravating a shortage of air-bag replacements needed in areas where investigations have shown to be more prone to malfunction. The supplier will be pressed for answers about its recall process Thursday at a U.S. Senate committee hearing.

"NHTSA and the Congress are behind this, and Takata will probably forfeit," said Jochen Siebert, managing director of JSC Automotive Consulting. "It's a nice try by Takata to get out of it, but I think that ship has sailed. NHTSA does not want to risk any more lives."

Piecemeal recalls left drivers unsure about whether airbags in their cars were prone to malfunction, drawing criticism from safety advocates and members of Congress, who said the approach would fail to protect motorists traveling or moving to humid areas.

### **Loaded shotgun**

NHTSA stoked the angst of drivers one month ago, when the agency told millions of motorists to immediately fix airbags that deploy too forcefully, breaking metal components within the device and shooting shards toward passengers.

David Friedman, the deputy administrator for NHTSA, voiced his concerns about the growing public anxiety in late October, when he wrote in a letter to Tokyo-based Takata that he was "deeply troubled" by the "erosion of public confidence in a proven life-saving technology."

The airbag failures, which have been linked to four U.S. deaths and a fatal accident of a pregnant woman in Malaysia, made consumers like Darryl Barton nervous.

Driving his Honda Civic was like having “a loaded shotgun pointed at me,” said Barton, a 34-year-old hospital call center worker who recalls spending hours on the phone and canceling his Halloween plans with his girlfriend before the car was fixed. “What was I going to tell her kids if something happened?”

Honda Motor Co., Takata’s biggest customer, instructed dealerships including the one near Barton’s home in Burlington, N.Y., to repair vehicles outside regions covered by its recall campaigns “at the request of concerned customers.”

### **Risking lives**

Living outside the regions eligible for recalls is just one of the roadblocks keeping some airbags from being fixed. Takata projected it could only make only one-third of the 4.3 million repair kits carmakers need by February, according to a presentation to automakers and NHTSA in September.

NHTSA’s latest push would aggravate the situation, according to the Japanese airbag maker.

“Takata is concerned that a national recall under these circumstances could potentially divert replacement air bags from where they’re needed, putting lives at risk,” the Japanese manufacturer said in a statement.

On Thursday, Hiroshi Shimizu, Takata’s senior vice president in charge of global quality assurance, will join Honda and Chrysler Group LLC executives to testify before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation. Senators also will question NHTSA’s Friedman.

### **Self repair**

Albert Abel is among the drivers now doubting the safety of his airbags.

Abel, 71, said he pulled a fuse under the dash to disable the passenger-side airbag in his 2002 Infiniti I35 sedan after it was replaced in mid-October. Abel, an inventor and engineer, said the service manager at his dealership couldn’t explain why the driver’s side airbag was safe and the passenger side one that needed to be replaced was dangerous.

“I talked to four different levels at the highway transportation group,” he said. “They were all very cooperative and very helpful and totally ignorant in the kindest sense of the word. They didn’t know the answers.”



