

Automakers meet to coordinate Takata airbag testing

Honda, Toyota, Chrysler, Ford, Nissan, Subaru, Mitsubishi, Mazda and BMW were expected to participate

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WASHINGTON -- Several automakers were meeting in metro Detroit today to begin an industrywide investigation into the cause and scope of faulty Takata airbag inflators, according to two sources with knowledge of the plans.

The meeting began at a suburban Detroit hotel at about 10 a.m. local time and continued into the afternoon. It was not clear how long the officials were planning to meet.

Toyota Motor Corp. proposed the initiative last week to pool industry resources quickly and accurately identify Takata inflators that need to be replaced. Automakers also are eager to find the exact cause behind the explosion of some Takata airbag inflators that have been linked to five deaths, scores of injuries and more than 13 million recalled vehicles in the U.S. since 2008.

Globally, including 550,000 more vehicles recalled today overseas, the auto industry has recalled nearly 20 million vehicles because of potentially lethal Takata airbags since 2008, according to Reuters estimates.

Representatives from Honda, Toyota, Chrysler, Ford, Nissan, Subaru, Mitsubishi, Mazda and BMW were expected at the meeting, according to the sources. Individual executives planning to attend were not identified, but one source said those participating represented quality, engineering and compliance functions at the companies.

The group is expected to discuss the selection of an independent, third-party engineering firm to handle testing and analysis of Takata inflators retrieved by automakers from recalled vehicles. Other topics on the agenda include logistics of the testing effort and determining which inflators will be tested by the independent lab and which will be tested by Takata, which continues to conduct its own tests of suspect inflators.

"By combining our collective efforts behind a coordinated, comprehensive testing program, we believe we can achieve greater results. Together we will be better equipped to address this issue more rapidly for all customers," Simon Nagata, CEO of Toyota Motor Engineering and Manufacturing North America, said in a statement Dec. 2 proposing the initiative.

Toyota declined to comment about the meeting.

The gathering comes amid eroding trust in Takata management as the Japanese airbag supplier's inflator recalls mount. Honda Motor Co. CEO Takanobu Ito said Tuesday that the company was prepared to launch a worldwide "investigative recall" to determine the cause of the defective airbags and would call back more vehicles with Takata airbags in additional regions outside the United States and Japan.

"We cannot depend on Takata to find the cause," Ito told Japan's Nihon Keizei Shimbun newspaper earlier this week.

On Monday, Honda said its nationwide recall of vehicles with driver-side Takata airbags in the United States would be expanded by about 2.6 million vehicles, hiking its Takata-related recalls here to about 8.7 million.

Mazda also said this week it would expand one of its recalls of Takata airbags to cover all U.S. states.

Takata faces growing pressure from U.S. lawmakers and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, which is conducting its own investigation into the matter.

U.S. Sens. Edward Markey, D-Mass., and Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., said Wednesday they wrote a letter to Takata CEO Shigehisa Takada seeking documents and information about whether the company followed industry design and performance standards on the airbag inflators.

"Industry testing standards are supposed to guard against the kinds of defects in Takata's airbags that have killed or injured a growing number of drivers," the senators wrote. "We want to know if those procedures were followed, if the results were provided to Mazda, Honda and other manufacturers and if so, whether the tests need to be made more stringent to better protect the lives of consumers."

In testimony before a U.S. House subcommittee last week, NHTSA deputy chief David Friedman said the agency was working to establish its own process to verify Takata inflator testing being done by the industry and hoped to hire an expert on chemical propellants used in airbag inflators by this week.

NHTSA officials were not expected to attend today's meeting, the two sources said.