



Automotive News

Jeep drivers still dying in gas tank fires 18 months into recall

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DETROIT/WASHINGTON (Bloomberg) -- Eighteen months into a recall of Jeeps with exploding gas tanks, drivers of the affected models are still dying and more than 1 million of the vehicles remain unfixed.

A top safety regulator has called the slow pace of repairs "woeful" and demanded that executives do more to reach owners of the affected Jeep Liberty and Grand Cherokee models, which can catch fire after being rear-ended. Since the Jeeps were recalled in June of 2013, at least six people have died in five crashes, including a pregnant Michigan woman in November, according to a tally maintained by the Center for Auto Safety.

"It's a callous disregard for human life by Chrysler," said Clarence Ditlow, executive director of the Washington-based advocacy group.

FCA US, the Fiat Chrysler Automobiles NV division that owns the Jeep brand, says it's moving as quickly as possible given the challenge finding drivers of vehicles that are between seven and 20 years old and that in many cases have been sold to second or third owners. The company says the vehicles met the crash-protection standards in place when they were introduced and that the severity of the crashes is a factor.

Last month, at a meeting in Washington, FCA representatives told regulators they'd redouble efforts to modify vehicles and reach more owners.

The Jeep recall has received less attention because regulators and politicians have been focused on General Motors' delayed response to a fatally flawed ignition switch. Besides the six recent deaths, regulators have previously identified 56 fatalities in 38 crashes involving 2002-2007 Jeep Liberty and 1993-1998 Jeep Grand Cherokee models. By comparison, four deaths in the U.S. have been linked to defective airbags made by Takata Corp.

Trailer hitch

In 2013, CEO Sergio Marchionne agreed to install a trailer hitch to help protect the fuel tank on the affected models. In November, David Friedman, deputy director of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, wrote Marchionne to lament the "woeful" rate of repairs.

After a recall, automakers must tell regulators every quarter how many cars they have fixed. Friedman said he was surprised that FCA had repaired only 3 percent of the 1.56 million recalled vehicles in the previous six months. That's the lowest rate of any recall of more than 1 million vehicles in the past five years, according to a Bloomberg review of NHTSA data.

"FCA US has inspected and/or serviced every vehicle that customers delivered to our dealers and we are endeavoring to increase customer response by further intensifying our outreach," the automaker said in a statement.

FCA is shooting a video this week starring a senior vice president of regulatory affairs, who'll explain the recall process and encourage owners to get Jeeps fixed. The video will be used on new recall-specific websites.

The outreach will be too late to save Kayla White, 23.

On Nov. 11, she was driving to work near Detroit in her recalled 2003 Jeep Liberty when she was struck from behind. Her vehicle burst into flames and she died at the scene. White worked at a restaurant in suburban Detroit and was expecting her first son, according to an obituary on Hopcroft Funeral Homes's website.

The accident report was turned over to local prosecutors this week to determine if the driver who rear-ended White will be charged and isn't available for release. The White family's lawyer, Gerald Thurswell, said he's waiting for the accident report before deciding whether to file a lawsuit.

Catch fire

Two days before Kayla White died, a 58-year-old Virginia man was killed when a truck laden with frozen turkeys rear-ended his 2007 Jeep while it was stalled on a bridge in Henrico County, Va., causing the Jeep to catch fire, according to the Virginia State Police. That crash remains under investigation.

The other fatal crashes since the recall was announced include one in Maryland last year and two more in 2013 that occurred in California and Massachusetts, according to the Center for Auto Safety.

FCA initially refused NHTSA's request to recall 2.7 million Jeeps, saying they didn't pose a safety risk. At the time, NHSTA said that by locating the gasoline tank between the axle and the bumper, rather than in front of the axle, the company made the vehicles less safe.

Later that month, Marchionne agreed to install trailer hitches on 1.56 million vehicles without admitting any defect. NHSTA says the hitch provides incremental safety benefits in certain low and moderate crash incidents. Upon closing its investigation in November, the agency said the Jeep models already performed similar to peers in higher speed crashes.

Of the five fatal accidents since the recall, all occurred on highways.



The 1998 Grand Cherokee is among the Jeeps to receive trailer hitch assemblies.

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