

U.S. investigates VW for ruptured Takata air bag

David Shepardson, Detroit News Washington Bureau 12:45 p.m. EDT August 17, 2015

Washington — The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said Monday it is investigating the rupture of a Takata air bag in a 2015 Volkswagen Tiguan in Missouri in June.

Defective Takata air bags are linked to least eight deaths worldwide and more than 100 injuries.

The German automaker — which surpassed Toyota Motor Corp. as the world's largest automaker in the first six months of 2015 — told The Detroit News earlier this year that it was not part of the Takata air bag recall of up to 33.8 million vehicles by 11 automakers.

In 2014, 10 automakers previously had recalled 17 million cars and trucks with faulty Takata air bags: Ford Motor Co., General Motors Co, Honda Motor Co., Toyota Motor Corp., Nissan Motor Co., BMW AG, Fiat Chrysler Automobiles NV, Mazda Motor Corp., Mitsubishi and Subaru Motors USA. They issued callbacks even as Takata refused to declare the parts defective. An 11th automaker — Daimler Trucks North America — was added to the recall this year.

The incident raises several questions, including how many VW vehicles worldwide may be impacted. The rupture of a side curtain air bag came soon after the vehicle was built and is not similar to other incidents that involved prolonged exposure to high humidity areas. The inflator can explode when activated, throwing shrapnel at drivers and passengers.

The special orders to Takata and the German automaker disclose that a Takata air bag inflator known as a SSI-20 ruptured in a 2015 Tiguan SUV on June 7. This is the fourth special order that NHTSA has sent to Takata — which has its North American headquarters in Auburn Hills — demanding documents. The U.S. Attorney's Office in Detroit is conducting a criminal investigation into Takata's handling of recall issues.

VW spokesman Mark Gillies said Monday the automaker is working to investigate the issue with Takata. He said the incident occurred after the driver hit a deer and said no police report was filed and the driver did not seek medical attention.

VW disclosed the incident to NHTSA on July 15. Gillies said Monday he did not know how many vehicles have Takata air bags. He said the company has “no comment” as to why VW airbags are not part of the wider Takata recalls.

Takata spokesman Jared Levy said the company doesn't think the VW incident is related to the other problems.

“While we are still investigating the cause of this malfunction, we believe it is unrelated to the previous recalls, which the extensive data suggests were a result of aging and long-term exposure to heat and high humidity. We are cooperating closely with NHTSA and the vehicle manufacturer,” Levy said.

In a Twitter posting in May, VW said “while we do use Takata, the parts on our VWs are not a part of the current recall.”

NHTSA ordered VW and Takata to respond by Aug. 24. NHTSA wants police reports and all records related to the rupture and whether any other VW vehicles have suffered ruptures. VW must turn over air bag testing records and a list of all vehicles that include phase stabilized ammonium nitrate as a propellant.

In June, Takata told Congress it will reduce the use of controversial air bag inflator propellant ammonium nitrate, as it faced harsh criticism for not moving faster to make fixes.

Takata vice president Kevin Kennedy told a House committee that the Japanese manufacturer will continue to use ammonium nitrate in its inflators — even as its competitors use other propellants — but said he expected that the company's use of the compound will decline as it shifts to another chemical.

“We also have alternate propellants now with guanidine nitrate. We started production a year or two ago and we're continuing to ramp those up. I think overall you will see our production of ammonium nitrate go down rapidly,” Kennedy said.

But he reiterated at various points that Takata will not immediately halt the use of the propellant. He noted that in newer air bags it is adding a drying agent to the compound that also extends the life of the air bag.

NHTSA previously ordered Takata to disclose all air bag inflators that it had sold to various automakers in the United States. In April, NHTSA upgraded its investigation into 12 million vehicles with potentially defective Takata air bags. And it began levying \$14,000 in daily civil penalties against the supplier for failing to respond to requests for information about more than 2.5 million pages of documents it has produced.

Under the consent deal announced in May, NHTSA suspended more than \$1 million in fines and said it would stop imposing daily fines.

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