

U.S. says 8th U.S. death linked to Takata airbag rupture



A recalled Takata airbag inflator after being removed from a Honda Pilot in Miami in June.

Photo credit: REUTERS

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December 23, 2015 - 11:26 am ET -- **UPDATED: 12/23/15 3:05 pm ET - adds details**

WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said today that an eighth U.S. death is linked to a faulty Takata airbag inflator, marking the first reported death since April and the ninth worldwide.

The **auto safety agency** also said it named a former U.S. Justice Department official to oversee the massive recalls of airbags and the Japanese parts firm's compliance with a settlement.

NHTSA spokesman Gordon Trowbridge told reporters on a conference call that the new death took place in July in a recalled used 2001 Honda Accord coupe near Pittsburgh, Pa. The unidentified teenaged driver was hospitalized after a Takata airbag ruptured and died several days later.

More recalls

<http://www.autonews.com/article/20151223/OEM11/151229958/u.s.-says-8th-u.s.-death-linked-to-takata-airbag-rupture>

Trowbridge said Honda, Fuji Heavy Industries Ltd.'s Subaru unit, and Mazda Motor Corp. will add an estimated "few hundred thousand vehicles" to the massive recall campaigns based on additional inflator testing and that others may as well.

The expanded recalls include the 2005-2008 Mazda6, 2002-2004 Honda CR-V and 2005-2008 Subaru Legacy and Outback.

Takata's inflators can explode with too much force and spray metal shrapnel into vehicle passenger compartments and are linked to nine deaths and more than 100 injuries.

All of the nine deaths, including the death of a pregnant woman in Malaysia, have been in Honda vehicles.

Reuters reported this month that civil suits involving most airbag deaths have been settled by Takata and Honda. **Bloomberg reported today** that Honda raised issues about the airbags with Takata officials in July 2009 -- long before the crisis became known to the public. Honda said it is working to determine the cause of the death in the latest case. The company said the prior owner first got a recall notice in 2010. Honda said it mailed a new recall notice on July 21, one day before the crash.

NHTSA said a quarter of vehicles recalled have been fixed, including a third of vehicles in high-humidity areas, where automakers believe the risk is highest for ruptures.

Independent monitor

NHTSA said it named John Buretta, a former official in the Justice Department's criminal division to serve as independent monitor overseeing the Takata recalls.

In November, Takata agreed to pay a \$70 million fine for safety violations and could face deferred penalties of up to \$130 million under a NHTSA settlement.

“For years, Takata has built and sold defective products, refused to acknowledge the defect, and failed to provide full information to NHTSA, its customers or the public,” Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx said when the penalties were announced. “This has been a mess and today DOT is stepping in to clean up the mess.”

The monitor will help regulators oversee one of the biggest and most complex safety recalls in U.S. automotive history, encompassing 23 million airbag inflators in 19 million vehicles manufactured by 12 car companies.

In November, NHTSA acted to accelerate the recalls under an unprecedented coordination plan that requires Takata to complete recalls for the most at-risk vehicles by the end of 2017.

Takata said in a statement Buretta "would have our full cooperation and support."

Two U.S. senators, Edward Markey, D-Mass., and Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., praised the appointment, but said it is "largely required because NHTSA has moved too slowly and ineptly for years, allowing a patchwork of recalls." They also want all vehicles with possibly defective airbags recalled.