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Car Maker's Fixes May Not Solve Issue

Toyota's U.S. Chief Tells Congress It Continues Hunt for Cause of Acceleration; U.S. to Expand Probe to Other Companies

By JOSEPH B. WHITE And KATE LINEBAUGH

WASHINGTON—Toyota Motor Corp.'s top U.S. executive told Congress on Tuesday that the company's recent safety recalls may not totally solve sudden unintended acceleration in its cars, as the transportation secretary said he would expand a federal probe to other auto makers.

House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Henry Waxman (D., Calif.) said U.S. auto-safety regulators, including the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, aren't equipped to assess electronic problems that some people have speculated may be a cause of Toyota's issues. He and other lawmakers said new legislation might be needed to address the concern.

"Car makers have entered the electronics era, but NHTSA seems stuck in a mechanical mindset," Mr. Waxman said. "We need to make sure the federal safety agency has the tools and resources it needs to ensure the safety of the electronic controls and on-board computers."

The Energy and Commerce Committee opened the first of three congressional sessions on Toyota's safety issues, hearing from a woman who survived a harrowing ride in a runaway Lexus; Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, who said he may seek new, unspecified legislation; and Jim Lentz, head of Toyota's U.S. sales operations.

On Wednesday, Toyota President Akio Toyoda is expected to testify before the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee. In prepared testimony, Mr. Toyoda apologized to customers and vowed the Japanese company will go back to basics to address quality problems.

Mr. Toyoda will meet later this week with Mr. LaHood, the transportation secretary said during his testimony.

Democrats and Republicans at Tuesday's hearing united in expressing alarm about sudden-acceleration accidents. Democrats were more pointed in criticizing Toyota's behavior, and pushed Mr. Lentz hard on the question of whether he could be certain electronic faults aren't to blame.

Several Republicans cautioned against a "witch hunt," echoing concerns of some Toyota dealers.

Mr. Lentz tried to assure lawmakers that Toyota's recent recalls of millions of vehicles have addressed the known causes of sudden-acceleration incidents. But consistent with the auto maker's newfound humility, Mr. Lentz also didn't close the door to the possibility that other causes, such as faulty electronics, could be involved.

"We never rule out anything that could cause sudden unintended acceleration," Mr. Lentz said. "We are vigilant and continue to look for causes. What we know today is it is not an electronic issue."

Toyota has recalled more than eight million vehicles globally to fix problems with sticky gas pedals, floor mats that can get trapped under accelerators, brake problems and other issues.

The uncertainty over what prompted Toyota and Lexus owners to lodge some 2,000 complaints with U.S. regulators about unintended acceleration was one of several issues lawmakers and witnesses addressed during a hearing that stretched from late morning to the evening hours. Another issue raised is whether NHTSA has the technical and human resources to assure the safety of increasingly sophisticated, electronically controlled vehicles.

Mr. LaHood testified that NHTSA receives more than 30,000 consumer complaints a year, and defended his agency's handling of the Toyota recalls. NHTSA's investigations of complaints about unintended acceleration have produced no evidence that electronic throttle systems are affected by electromagnetic interference, as some have speculated, he said. NHTSA is conducting a new review of that issue. The agency also is investigating whether Toyota violated rules requiring timely notification of safety problems.

Regulators will examine other car makers in their probe of sudden-acceleration problems, Mr. LaHood said. "We're just starting our review," he said. He dismissed as "baloney" the accusation from some quarters that NHTSA was being tough on Toyota because the U.S. government owns 60% of General Motors Co.

In one emotional exchange, Toyota's Mr. Lentz teared up as he recalled losing his brother, who was 30 years old, to a car crash two decades ago.

"There's not a day that goes by that I don't think of that," Mr. Lentz said in a quivering voice. "So I know what these families are going through."

Mr. Lentz apologized for Toyota's failure to address safety problems more quickly. "We acknowledge these mistakes, we apologize for them and we have learned from them," he said.

Earlier, the committee heard dramatic testimony from a woman who survived a sudden-acceleration incident. Rhonda Smith of Sevierville, Tenn., **said her Lexus ES350 accelerated out of control on a Tennessee highway in 2006, reaching speeds of 100 miles per hour.**

"I prayed to God to help me," she said as she choked back tears. Ms. Smith, who eventually was able to get her car stopped, said Toyota was dismissive of her complaint.

Separately, NHTSA said the Lexus driven by Mrs. Smith is still on the road. The new owners have reported 27,000 trouble-free miles, an agency spokeswoman said.

NHTSA investigators determined a floor mat had trapped the accelerator in full-throttle position. But Mrs. Smith insisted the mat wasn't at fault, instead blaming the vehicle's electronics.

Rep. Bart Stupak (D., Mich.), chairman of a House Energy and Commerce subcommittee, said the Toyota crisis draws into question whether a U.S. law known as the Tread Act has achieved its purposes. The law was passed about 10 years ago after fatal accidents involving Ford sport-utility vehicles and Firestone tires. It boosted reporting requirements for car makers and was designed to provide regulators more tools to track safety defects.

Rep. Edward Markey (D., Mass.) said the crisis may result in strengthening the Tread Act.

Throughout Tuesday's hearing, the issue of whether modern automotive electronics can put drivers at risk, and whether

Toyota underplayed the risks, was a central question.

Sean Kane, president of Safety Research & Strategies Inc., a for-profit car-safety research firm, said Toyota hasn't done enough to examine its electronics or to undertake timely safety recalls.

"If the floor mat was to blame, Toyota is guilty of failing to acknowledge the very serious and real consequences of pedal entrapment for at least two years," Mr. Kane testified.

Rep. Steve Buyer (R., Ind.) pointed out the ties between Mr. Kane's firm and plaintiff's attorneys who represent accident victims suing Toyota.

Automotive technology Prof. David Gilbert of Southern Illinois University, who is being paid by Mr. Kane's firm, said by altering the circuitry in a gas pedal he was able to replicate a circumstance in a Toyota vehicle that experienced sudden acceleration, without creating an error code in the vehicle's computer that a service person could see.

—Josh Mitchell contributed to this article.

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