



Ford F-150 recall greatly expanded: safety regulators

WASHINGTON/DETROIT (Reuters) - Ford Motor Co and U.S. safety regulators have agreed to a greatly expanded recall of the best-selling vehicle in North America, the Ford F-150 pickup truck, the regulators said on Thursday.

The expanded recall is for a possible short-circuit that could cause airbags to deploy unexpectedly, and involves nearly 1.2 million F-150 pickup trucks and 16,000 Lincoln Mark LT vehicles, said the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

This is in addition to a previous recall of 144,000 Ford F-150 trucks, bringing the total for this issue to 1.33 million vehicles, NHTSA said.

F-150 is the primary model of the F-series pickup trucks, the best-selling vehicles in North America for the past 34 years. Pickup trucks and SUVs generally create more profit for automakers than do smaller cars.

Ford said it knows of no crashes or injuries caused by the issue. It will begin notifying vehicle owners in May to bring the pickup trucks or Lincolns into dealers for repair at no cost. Repairs will take less than half a day, Ford said.

But owners are asked to bring in their vehicles right away if their airbag warning light is illuminated, Ford said. If the light is ignored, in some circumstances, the driver's side front airbag could deploy unexpectedly.

Ford said the airbag warning typically is illuminated for "an extended period" before the driver's side front airbag surprises a driver by deploying. Drivers should have time to safely take the vehicle to a Ford or Lincoln/Mercury dealer if they do so when the warning signal is first lit, Ford said.

Ford said its field data indicates that drivers have maintained control of their vehicles if the front side airbag deploys.

Overall, the recall affects 1.32 million trucks from the model years 2004 to 2006.

A mistake in the assembly of the vehicles could cause an airbag wire in the steering wheel to short-circuit, Ford and NHTSA said.

The expansion comes after talks between the automaker and safety regulators in Washington.

"We are pleased that Ford shares our commitment to safety and is taking action to protect consumers by expanding its safety recall," said NHTSA Administrator David Strickland in a statement.

In February, Ford said in a response to safety regulators, "the condition does not present an unreasonable risk to motor vehicle safety" but agreed to the recall of 144,000 F-150s.

On Thursday, Ford said it held to its previous statement that the issue is not an "unreasonable risk," but agreed to the expanded recall "to reassure customers of Ford's commitment to safety and to eliminate any possible customer confusion."

Ford cooperated during the study of the airbag issue throughout the process, NHTSA said.

Ford shares were down 2 percent at \$14.67 on Thursday morning, compared with a drop of 0.4 percent in the S&P 500 index.