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New Car Safety Rules Weighed

By Caroline E. Mayer and Neil Irwin
Washington Post Staff Writers
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U.S. Transportation Secretary Rodney E. Slater said yesterday that his agency was considering ways to strengthen rules requiring automakers, tire companies and other automotive suppliers to alert federal regulators about potential safety problems.

At a news conference to discuss the agency's annual funding bill now before Congress--but dominated by the recent recall of 6.5 million Firestone tires--Slater defended the role his agency has played in the recall, saying regulators launched an investigation into the problem tires as soon they received complaints linking the tires to fatalities.

Since the recall was announced on Aug. 9, some safety and consumer advocates have criticized the agency for not acting before the spring of this year, especially in light of an e-mail sent two years ago by State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Co. expressing concern over the growing number of Firestone tire failures. Critics have also said the agency's rules do not require manufacturers to give an early warning of possible defects.

"I'm proud of the agency; I think the agency has done a tremendous job and continues to do a tremendous job," Slater said. But he added: "I do think there are lessons we all learned."

Among those is the question of whether Firestone and Ford Motor Co., which has used the recalled tires on its best-selling Explorer sport-utility vehicle, should have notified the government sooner about complaints and lawsuits that involved the tires. Many lawsuits allege that the treads separated from the tires and caused accidents, many of them rollovers.

Through the end of 1999, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, part of the Transportation Department, had received only 46 complaints about the Firestone ATX and Wilderness tires that Bridgestone/Firestone Inc. voluntarily recalled. Most of these tires are on SUVs, with 60 percent of the ATX and Wilderness tires standard equipment on Explorers.

Of the 46 complaints filed over a 10-year period with NHTSA, none involved a fatality, Slater said. It was only after the complaints spiked--and reports of fatalities began to pour in, that the agency launched an investigation in early May. By early August, the agency had received

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more than 770 complaints, with reports of 62 deaths and more than 100 injuries.

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Slater added that State Farm's 1998 e-mail cited 21 incidents but no fatalities. That "was something that didn't grab our attention," he said, but he added that in the future the agency will watch more closely for such trends.



Under NHTSA rules, manufacturers are required to notify the government when they have concluded there is a safety defect in their equipment. And Firestone has never reached that official conclusion. To date, it maintains that the tires have failed because consumers have either improperly maintained them or not kept them adequately inflated to the recommended tire pressure.

Auto manufacturers are not required to tell the government about lawsuits filed against them--and there have been about 100 involving ATX and Wilderness tires, the earliest filed in 1992. Nor do they have to notify regulators about large numbers of consumer complaints.

Slater said the agency is now considering "these kinds of issues" to see if the government should receive earlier notification of potential problems. He declined to be more specific.

While saying he "didn't want to get into pointing fingers," Slater did express concern over Ford's failure to notify NHTSA that it was replacing thousands of tires on sport-utility vehicles overseas in the past year. NHTSA does not require that overseas actions be reported.

But, Slater said: "I think there is a question about timing here. We should have known about the recalls in other countries."

At this point, Slater said the problem seems solely a "tire issue" and does not appear to involve Ford Explorers.

NHTSA Administrator Sue Bailey, serving her first week on the job, said the agency's investigation continues and may take six months. The agency is looking at all ATX and Wilderness tires, not just the ones covered by the recall (all 15-inch ATX tires and all 15-inch Wilderness tires that were made in Firestone's Decatur plant).

"We continue to investigate whether others should be recalled," said Ken Weinstein, NHTSA's associate administrator for safety assurance. As part of its investigation, the agency has requested information from Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. on similar tires. In the mid-1990s, Goodyear made 2.3 million tires for the Explorer. There have been no complaints of tread separation on those tires. Weinstein said Goodyear was not under investigation; the agency simply wanted to learn about its experience with the same size of tire.

Within the next two weeks, NHTSA also plans to ask other carmakers for data on their experience with Firestone tires on SUVs, Weinstein said.

Meanwhile, the agency directed Firestone to make changes in the recall

letter it is planning to send its customers to make it clear what the problem is, its consequence and how it can be corrected--by Firestone's competitors as well as Firestone dealers. Both NHTSA and Firestone officials declined to discuss the changes.

Ford executives said yesterday that 861,874 tires--about 13 percent of the recalled tires--have already been replaced.

In a conference call with reporters, company officials also tried to play down recent reports that when Explorer tires are inflated to high pressures, it increases the risk of a vehicle rollover, a risk that engineers described in internal memos. Firestone has said the tires are less likely to experience tread separation when they are inflated to a tire pressure of 30 pounds per square inch, but Ford recommended lower pressures of 26 psi.

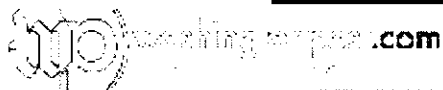
The Ford executives stressed that the memos were written by engineers in the middle stages of vehicle design. Helen Petrauskas, Ford's vice president of environmental and safety engineering, said the memos show "engineers worrying about making this vehicle as good as they possibly can." She said: "Somehow that was held against us, that our engineers are worrying about the performance of the vehicle. That's what engineers are paid to do."

In the end, she added, the car that was made met all safety requirements.

Ford and Firestone officials--as well as Slater and Bailey--have been asked to testify next month in hearings called by Senate Commerce Committee Chairman John McCain (R-Ariz). Today, staff members from the House Commerce Committee, headed by Rep. Thomas J. Bliley Jr. (R-Va.), were to travel to Ford's headquarters in Michigan to discuss the issue with company officials.

Slater said he welcomed the congressional probes as an opportunity to explore whether the agency needs additional enforcement authority.

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