

# More recalls of Takata exploding airbags

By Shannon Jones  
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Automaker Honda said it is expanding its recall of vehicles equipped with defective Takata airbags. The decision comes in the wake of another fatal crash in which an airbag exploded, killing the driver.

Joel Knight of South Carolina was killed in December after his vehicle, a 2006 Ford Ranger, struck a stray cow. The airbag ruptured, sending metal debris into his throat. According to the family's attorney, if not for the rupture the crash would have only been moderate, and Knight likely would have survived. The driver's side airbag on his vehicle had not been subject to recall until last month.

So far 14 carmakers have recalled 28 million airbag inflators in 24 million vehicles. However, millions of additional vehicles with potentially defective inflators are still being driven. About 54 million airbag inflators in total have been shipped to the US. Takata controls some 30 percent of the worldwide airbag market.

The explosive, ammonium nitrate, contained in the airbag inflator may break down over time when exposed to moisture and pose a danger. When a vehicle is recalled it receives a new inflator, a metal casing enclosing explosives that help the airbag expand in the event of a collision.

At least 10 deaths, nine of those in the United States, are tied to the defect. Honda recently expanded its recall of vehicles equipped with the defective airbags by more than one-third in North America. The latest action involved 2.23 million vehicles in the US. Honda alone has now recalled 8.5 million Honda and Acura vehicles.

At the time of Knight's death his Ranger vehicle had not been the subject of a recall. Ford has since recalled 400,000 Rangers built between 2004 and 2006 to replace defective airbags.

A *New York Times* report in September 2014 reported 139 injuries related to the defect across all automakers.

Recalls of Takata airbags have proceeded in piecemeal fashion ever since 2008 when Honda first alerted regulators to the problem. A general pattern has emerged: the issue subsides for a time, then another widely reported death linked to the airbags occurs and more recalls are ordered.

Repairs have taken place at a tortoise pace due to shortages of replacement parts. As of late December only 27 percent of recalled vehicles had the problem corrected.

The death of Knight prompted calls by Democratic Senators Edward Markey of Massachusetts and Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut for the Obama administration to expand the recall of Takata airbags.

Meanwhile, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the federal agency that oversees vehicle safety, has given Takata another three years to prove that ammonium nitrate inflators are safe. This continues a pattern of extreme indulgence shown by the agency to carmakers.

NHTSA imposed a token \$70 million fine on Takata in November for providing incomplete or misleading data about defective airbags to the agency since 2009. The company could face another \$170 million in additional penalties if it violates terms of the settlement. The company has yet to provide a root cause for the airbag ruptures.

Takata reported profits of \$69 million in the quarter ending in December 2015. That represented a nearly 300 percent increase over the same period last year. Sales for the quarter totaled some \$1.5 billion. The company recorded \$89 million in recall-related costs in the preceding nine-month period. The company's fiscal year ends in March.

In 2004, Honda first alerted Takata about the airbag problem, but it did not issue a recall or notify NHTSA. In 2008 Honda issued a recall for just 4,205 vehicles, and six months later expanded it to 510,000 cars. At the

time, NHTSA belatedly opened an investigation, but did not take any action.

In 2014, NHTSA issued a recall for 7.8 million vehicles, but in a bizarre twist limited it to a few states in areas of high humidity. Owners of defective vehicles in non-recall states were not notified and not eligible for repairs.

A review panel commissioned by Takata released a report Tuesday on the exploding airbag issue. The panel, composed of engineers and former government regulators, issued a toothless report calling for better quality-control systems. Highlighting the revolving door between the auto industry and the US Department of Transportation, the panel included Samuel Skinner, transportation secretary in the administration of President George HW Bush.

Takata has also hired new public relations personnel and reshuffled management in response to the continued revelations.

In a related development, another airbag manufacturer, Continental Automotive Systems, said it is recalling 5 million airbag control units. The devices are fitted to vehicles manufactured by Honda, Fiat Chrysler, Mercedes-Benz and a Chrysler-based Volkswagen.

It follows a recall by Mercedes-Benz in October last year of certain 2008 and 2009 models because the Continental-manufactured control units could corrode. The defect would cause the airbag to expand unexpectedly or not at all in the event of a crash.

NHTSA began a safety investigation in August after 19 complaints from drivers that airbags failed to inflate in older model Honda Accords.

Meanwhile, General Motors will face at least 16 death and injury lawsuits this year for defective ignition switches linked to a minimum of 169 deaths. Last year GM agreed to pay 124 death and 275 injury claims related to defective ignition switches on lower end vehicles, a defect it had known about since 2001, but covered up until 2014. The victim compensation fund received a total of 474 death claims and another 289 claims for category one injuries, including quadriplegia, paraplegia, double amputation, permanent brain damage or pervasive burns. In addition, GM agreed to pay civil damages in cases involving another 45 deaths.

GM officials avoided all criminal charges in relation

to its more than decade-long cover-up of the ignition defect, receiving a \$900 million fine instead. This continues the record of the Obama administration of shielding corporate criminals, from the BP oil disaster to the bankers responsible for the 2008 financial crash.

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