
CENTER FOR AUTO SAFETY

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April 16, 2014

Mary T. Barra
Chief Executive Officer
General Motor Company
PO Box 33170
Detroit MI 48232-5170

Dear Ms Barra:

In the fall of 2001, General Motors made a fatal design decision that condemned untold numbers of consumers to death and serious injury. We now know, from Engineering Drawings and Documents submitted to the U.S. Congress by General Motors, the company created two competing designs for the ignition switch on the 2003 Saturn Ion and later models including the Chevrolet Cobalt and other recalled vehicles. But GM chose to use the ignition switch that would fail as your customers were driving innocently on the highway.

One design was the short detent spring and plunger that allowed the ignition key to move easily from the “run” position to the “accessory” position with the vehicle in motion and cut off the engine, power steering, power brakes and airbag, creating an unreasonable risk to safety. The other was the long detent spring and plunger with greater torque that made it much harder to move the ignition key from the “run” position to the “accessory” position. The rejected long detent spring and plunger design became the silent remedy GM subsequently introduced into production in late 2006 without changing the part number, thus secretly fixing the models made after that date. But General Motors also did not recall the earlier models that it already knew were failing on the highway, causing death and injury as it was obligated to do under law.

And, apparently, in conversations with & submissions to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration beginning in 2004, GM never revealed its knowledge of the two different designs: one installed in the early models from 2003 to late 2006 that was failing on the highway, and one that was safe but not installed until well after GM knew people were being killed and injured by the unsafe design.

Prior to your testimony before the U.S. Congress, General Motors submitted what we have just discovered are obscure but “smoking gun” documents: Engineering Drawings for the two different ignition switch detent springs and plungers for the 2003 Saturn. The first done in September 2001 was the long detent spring and plunger, [Drawing Number 741-79378](#). The second done in October 2001 was the short detent spring and plunger, [Drawing Number 741-75259](#), with a cross reference to the earlier drawing. As part of the same document, General Motors submitted [Delphi Engineering Drawing Number 741-76307-T](#) for the Ignition Switch Assembly, dated April 30, 2004 with revisions and notes through March 27, 2007. The drawing documented a change from the short detent spring and plunger, 741-75259, to the long detent spring and plunger, 741-79378, on April 21, 2006.

Prior to your testimony before the U.S. Congress, General Motors also submitted an October 29, 2013, email from Antero Cuervo of Delphi to Lyle D Miller of Delphi entitled: [“Request for Information Chevrolet Cobalt Ignition Switch P/N 10392423.”](#) Mr. Cuervo was tasked with determining “when the plunger and spring length might have been changed” given the part number for the ignition switch had not changed. Mr. Cuervo’s email confirmed the above history for both the long and short detent spring and plungers dating from 2001. The switch from the short detent spring and plunger to the long detent spring and plunger was approved on April 21, 2006 by Engineering Change 57128. Mr. Cuervo wrote: “Previous revision, Rev D of Delphi p/n NME74176307 (GM p/n 10392423) was also released under CA191471. In the revision block of this print, it is stated that detent spring & plunger assy p/n 74-179378 was previously p/n 74-175259 in revisions B and A , and it was changed on revision C. The date of this change is 04/21/06 and it was authorized by Engineering Change 57128 When comparing them [prints of spring and plungers], you can see they are different.” “In summary, Engineering Change 57128 authorized, among other things, to change detent spring & plunger assy from p/n 74-175259 to p/n 74-179378 (NME74179378 when released on GES). Looking at the prints of both part numbers they are different and match with the differences described below.”

Were you briefed on these internal General Motors documents prior to your testimony before Congress? Since they were submitted to Congress before you testified, surely your engineering staff should have told you about the shocking contents of these documents. They paint a tragic picture of the cost culture and cover up at General Motors. The conclusion we draw from examining the two different designs of the ignition switches under consideration in 2001 is that General Motors picked a smaller and cheaper ignition switch that cost consumers their lives and saved General Motors money. The documents show that when General Motors changed the ignition switch in 2006, it did not have to develop a new more robust design because GM engineers had already designed the safer switch that GM previously rejected in 2001.

We call on you to publicly and openly produce all documents relevant to the decision-making on the selection of the lethal short detent spring and plunger switch in 2001 including documents showing the costs of the two switches. Who inside GM made these decisions and at what level?

Given these startling revelations that a safer switch existed in 2001 before the Saturn and Cobalt were put into production, we call on you to make the full “unvarnished” internal investigation of Anton Valukas public as he must surely probe these areas.

Sincerely,



Clarence Ditlow
Executive Director, Center for Auto Safety



Joan Claybrook
President Emeritus, Public Citizen

cc: Anthony Foxx, US Secretary of Transportation
David Friedman, NHTSA Acting Administrator
Preet Bharara, US Attorney, SDNY