

LEMON TIMES



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GM ABS RECALL TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE

After five years of investigation, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) got GMC to conduct a voluntary recall of each of the following 1991-96 4-wheel drive GMC and Chevrolet trucks: Blazer, Jimmy, S-10 Sonoma, T-10, and T-10 Blazer (NHTSA recall 99V-193). The recall covers only 1.1 million GMC and Chevrolet trucks containing the Kelsey Hayes EBC4 anti-lock braking systems (ABS). The vehicles subject to the recall contain a defective switch mechanism that prevents the vehicle from switching into 2-wheel drive mode from the 4-wheel drive mode. This failure may lead to increased stopping distance, accidents and injuries. The problem is intermittent and occurs without warning, increasing the danger of the malfunction.

In addition to the problems identified by the NHTSA recall, some of these vehicles, along with 2-wheel drive trucks manufactured by GMC, also have programming problems related to the same Kelsey Hayes EBC4 unit. The 1993-96 Chevrolet Blazers and GMC Jimmy utilities, 1994-96 Chevrolet S-10 and GMC Sonoma pickup trucks, 1992-95 Chevrolet Astro Vans and GMC Safaris, and 1993-96 G-series vans are all subject to the service campaign. Unlike some other vehicles containing the EBC4 unit, these vehicles use a 3-wheel speed sensor to trigger the ABS unit. The sensor has been identified as the source of the programming malfunction.

The service campaign arose out of the same investigation as the federal recall. The defect is described as a braking performance problem that occurs on "transitional surfaces." Unlike the problem identified in the recall, most of the 4-wheel drive vehicles in the service campaign population can switch back and forth between the 2 and 4-wheel drive modes. However, the computer in these vehicles may fail to reset when shifted into the 2-wheel drive mode after driving in 4-wheel drive. The effect essentially resembles the defect in the recalled vehicles -- the

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COMBINED FEDERAL CAMPAIGN

Make your contribution to promote automotive safety by donating to Center for Auto Safety, #2807 in the Combined Federal Campaign -- or look for us in your local state and United Way Charitable fund drives.

FORD'S 3.8L ENGINE HEAD GASKET HEADACHE

All across America, millions of 1988-95 Ford vehicles with 3.8 liter V6 engines have Ford head gaskets that could fail at any time, costing thousands of dollars to repair each vehicle if the head gasket takes the engine with it. In 1998 Ford sent a Technical Service Bulletin to its dealers advising them that the original factory head gasket on the 1988-95 Ford Taurus and Mercury Sable, 1988-94 Lincoln Continental, and 1995 Ford Windstar was prone to failure. The Bulletin also advised dealers that Ford had designed new head gaskets and bolts which would take 7 to 8 hours of labor to install. In June 1998 Ford notified 1994-95 Taurus/Sable and 1995 Windstar owners that it would pay for head gasket repairs through 5 years or 60,000 miles but told 1994 Continental owners it would cover them through 6 years or 75,000 miles. The difference is major because 40% of failures reported to the Center for Auto Safety (CAS) occur between 60,000 and 75,000 miles. The notification, Ford Service Campaign 98M01,

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BROKEN PROMISES

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ABS system engages in a low speed stopping situation, increasing the driver's stopping distance and leading to accidents and injuries. This problem is also intermittent but is more likely to occur when the vehicle is traveling on a wet driving surface.

A third group of trucks is still under investigation: 1992-95 Chevy and GMC Suburban. These vehicles also have the Kelsey Hayes EBC4 ABS unit. However, neither GMC nor NHTSA has been able to diagnose the source of the problem. While the investigation officially covers 1992-95 Suburban, NHTSA is collecting complaints on 1992-97 vehicles. In 1995, GMC switched from the EBC4 to the EBC310 model of the Kelsey Hayes ABS unit.

Since 1994, NHTSA has received over 10,000 complaints related to ABS performance on GMC and Chevy trucks, SUVs, and minivans. Additionally, over 2,000 accidents and 290 injuries have been reported to NHTSA relating to these vehicles and ABS failure. GMC has also received over 121,000 service warranty claims for repair or replacement of ABS systems in these vehicles.

During the course of the investigation, GMC alleged most of the accidents and complaints relating to the ABS malfunction were simply the result of driver unfamiliarity with the ABS system. In a response to the investigations on Chevy models S-10 and Blazer and GMC models S-15 Sonoma, Jimmy, and Bravado, GMC

argued that the pedal dropping to the floor was a normal function of the ABS system. GMC also stated that drivers faced with such conditions needed to simply apply more pressure, even if the pedal was all the way down. In order to apply the required pressure to the pedal, GMC instructed drivers to sit closer to the steering column, even though these instructions create a safety hazard for shorter drivers. As an earlier solution to the functioning of the Kelsey-Hayes unit, GMC distributed a video to consumers on proper braking technique in a car with ABS and instructed dealers to go over the system with new car owners.

The recall and service campaign are a clear omission that the vehicles are defective and not the drivers. Unfortunately, GMC's action is too little, too late. It should have been done years ago and it still should cover more vehicles. Moreover, GMC will not conduct the recall and service campaign until early 2000, forcing vehicle owners to worry at every stop. ✖

LEGISLATIVE BATTLE OVER SALVAGE VEHICLE TITLES

Providing strong nationally uniform rules for titling motor vehicles, previously wrecked or seriously damaged, is necessary to protect consumers from unknowingly buying rebuilt wrecks. Hurricane Floyd flooded thousands of vehicles in New Jersey and North Carolina, which clearly illustrates

the need for uniform legislation. Many of these vehicles will be sold to consumers across the country without any disclosure of their previous flooded condition on the title, thus concealing such defects as rusted engines or damaged electrical systems.

This is the focus of an effort lead by Senators Diane Feinstein, Richard Bryan and Carl Levin on behalf of consumer groups and state attorneys general versus Senator Majority Leader Trent Lott on behalf of auto dealers and insurance companies.

State laws concerning the titling of cars that have been seriously damaged in accidents or floods vary greatly. Some states have strong laws that require a vehicle title to indicate serious damage while other states either have weak requirements or no requirements at all.

Insurance companies sell damaged cars at auctions. These cars may be purchased by disreputable repairers who fix the cars as cheaply as possible, obtain clean titles in a state with weak laws and sell the vehicles to unsuspecting consumers at higher prices as safe cars. Because of their spot welds and other shoddy repairs, the structural integrity of these vehicles is minimal. In a crash they may collapse, causing serious injury, even death, to the occupants. Sometimes they even collapse without a crash.

Senate Bill S. 678, sponsored by Senators Feinstein, Bryan and Levin and modeled on the Federal Odometer Fraud Act, creates a minimum standard all

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REBUILT WRECKS

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states must follow in titling damaged vehicles. States with stronger provisions may maintain their laws. A car's title history must be disclosed to consumers before they purchase a used car. S. 678 also contains a clear, precise definition of a nonrepairable vehicle, i.e. damage equal to 90 percent of its value. Such a vehicle's identification number (VIN) will be retired and entered in a national database. This stops car thieves from transferring a wrecked car's VIN onto a stolen vehicle. The bill also permits individuals to sue for violations of the law. S. 678 is supported by CAS and a coalition of state attorneys general, unions, consumer groups, consumer attorneys, public interest groups and the auto recyclers association.

In contrast, Senator Lott's bill, S. 655, relies on voluntary participation by states, so some will opt out and title-washing will continue. States with stronger laws have to revise their laws downward to participate in the federal program. Individuals may not sue for violations of the law; only state and federal officials may sue. Furthermore, S. 655 has a less clear definition of nonrepairable. This bill is supported by car dealers and auto insurance companies that claim they cannot afford to lose the income they earn selling wrecked cars at auctions. In early December the Bill was endorsed by the AAA.

In early November, Senator Lott said no legislation concerning salvage titles would be passed before the 2000 presidential election because the opposing parties failed to reach a compromise. However, in the light of recently received endorsements, it seems that Senator Lott is working on passing the S. 655 bill. ★

HEAD GASKET WARS

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warned owners that "premature failure of head gaskets could cause engine failure." CAS analysis of consumer complaints show that Ford has established a secret warranty for owners who experience head gasket failures beyond the terms of Service Campaign 98M01 by paying for repairs beyond 60,000 miles for consumers who complain loudly.

Chuck Catanese of Independence KY had a head gasket failure 68,613 miles on his 1995 Windstar which cost him \$986.59 to repair. After Ford turned him down, Mr. Catanese became the proverbial squeaky wheel and even set up his own Website, <http://home.att.net/~ccatanese/ford>, to tell the world about head gasket woes in Windstar. In the face of such determined persistence, Ford gave in and reimbursed Mr. Catanese his full repair costs. Having helped himself, Mr. Catanese continues to operate his Website to help other 3.8L Ford head gasket victims.

On November 24, CAS wrote William Clay Ford, the great-grandson of Henry Ford and the new Chairman of Ford Motor

Company, about the 3.8L head gasket fiasco and asked him to have Ford cover head gasket and engine repair costs for the full 120,000 mile average useful life of these vehicles. CAS pointed out that the head gasket was a non-maintenance item in Ford's Owner Manual and as such should last for the life of the vehicle but for the defect in manufacture. CAS pointed out that the 3.8L engine head gasket is just the latest example of Ford Motor Company trying to cover up a defect and avoid responsibility for complying with the law. Citing repeated fines and complaints from the Environmental Protection Agency, Federal Trade Commission and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, CAS told Mr. Ford that "no other auto company holds such a widespread reputation for lawlessness over the years." By avoiding recalls, Ford forces consumers to pay for repairing defects while riding at risk of failures on the highway which can lead to costly repairs, if not accidents, deaths and injuries.

CAS wrote Mr. Ford: "As the new Chairman of the Ford Company and the heir to one of the nation's most prominent families, we call on you to exercise moral and management leadership by bringing Ford Motor Company back from the edge of lawlessness and make it a model for corporate responsibility. A good start would be to admit that Ford has badly handled the 3.8-liter engine head gasket failure and implement the plan of action proposed by the Center for Auto Safety." ★



Recall Roundup is a regular feature of LEMON TIMES that alerts members to selected major or just plain interesting vehicle recalls since the previous issue. For copies of recalls, call NHTSA's Technical Reference Division at 800.445.0197 and cite the recall number listed in parentheses below.

DaimlerChrysler

622,000 1996 Town & Country, Dodge Caravan/Grand Caravan, Plymouth Voyager/Grand Voyager

- ◆ Fuel can leak from the fuel tank and cause a fire. (99V-216)
550,000 1993-95 Concorde, LHS, Intrepid, Dodge Vision
- ◆ The lower control arm attaching brackets could break due to fatigue and separate from the engine cradle. The transmission half-shaft may pull out of the transaxle resulting in a loss of power. (99V-215)

Ford

280,000 1998 Contour, Mercury Mystique

- ◆ Airbag sensor wiring may become brittle and crack due to environmental stress. The airbag warning light may illuminate and disable the airbag supplemental restraint system. (99V-243)

Volvo

139,588 1997 850-Series & 1998 S70, V70, C70

- ◆ Extended operation of the headlight switch could result in inconsistent operation of switch and loss of lights when switch is in "ON" position. (99V-235)
124,381 1998 SV0, V70, C70
- ◆ Front passenger airbag may be overly sensitive to some electrostatic discharges which could cause inadvertent deployment. (99V-236). ✱

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