

Chrysler and NHTSA Resolve Request for Jeep Recall

by Irena Granaas

Chrysler and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) have, according to a Chrysler news release, “resolved their differences” regarding NHTSA’s request to have the automaker recall 1993-2004 Jeep Grand Cherokee and 2002-07 Jeep Liberty vehicles.

As reported in this newspaper June 10, Chrysler refused NHTSA’s June 3 request to conduct a safety recall of Model Year 1993-98 Jeep Grand Cherokee ZJ platform vehicles, Model Year 1999-2004 Jeep Grand Cherokee WJ platform vehicles, and Model Year 2002-07 Jeep Liberty vehicles based on the KJ platform.

Chrysler disagreed with NHTSA’s conclusion that the estimated 2.7 million vehicles included in the latter recall request were defective and posed a safety hazard, while NHTSA officials insisted the vehicles had a design defect in the placement of the gas tanks, posing a risk of tank punctures and fuel leaks when the vehicles are subjected to rear-end collisions. In some cases, subject vehicles struck in the rear have caught fire and, in a few of those

instances, deaths have occurred.

As a result of the agreement announced last week, Chrysler will conduct a voluntary safety recall of the 1993-1998 ZJ platform Jeep Grand Cherokee and the 2002-07 Jeep Liberty KJ platform vehicles. That totals about 2.49 million vehicles, but Chrysler estimates only about 1.56 million of them are still on the road.

In a June 18 news release, Chrysler cited safety as a “paramount concern” and sums up, “Chrysler Group’s analysis of the data confirms that these vehicles are not defective and are among the safest in the peer group. Nonetheless, Chrysler Group recognizes that this matter has raised concerns for its customers and wants to take further steps, in coordination with NHTSA, to provide additional measures to supplement the safety of its vehicles.”

In a document obtained recently by the *Detroit Auto Scene*, Matthew W. Liddane, Chrysler vice president – Vehicle Concepts, Integration, Functional Sciences & Regulatory Affairs, responds to Frank Borris II, NHTSA director, Office of Defects In-

vestigation (ODI), Office of Enforcement, with a clear statement of Chrysler’s position and what steps the automaker has agreed to take.

In the document, Liddane states Chrysler’s position that most of the crashes identified as reasons for a recall are “high-speed, high-energy collisions” that in most cases “would not have been prevented by taking any reasonable countermeasure steps” and would have occurred in similar makes and models under the same conditions.

He adds that “During the discussions between our staffs, we mutually identified an opportunity to incrementally improve the performance” of some of the subject vehicles in some types of low-speed rear-impact crashes.

While Liddane makes it clear that Chrysler still “does not agree that the risk of fuel leakage in low-speed impacts” for any of the vehicles in question “constitute a safety-related defect within the meaning of the federal safety laws,” Chrysler will conduct a voluntary safety recall of these units to offer owners of the affected ZJ and KJ platform Jeeps an upgrade to the rear structure

of the vehicles by adding a trailer hitch “to better manage the crash forces” in low-speed impacts.

Owners will receive written notice of an opportunity to bring their Jeep in for a free inspection of the vehicle’s rear structure, and, if the vehicle has no trailer hitch, a Chrysler trailer hitch will be installed free of charge, “provided the condition of the vehicle can support proper installation.”

A Chrysler trailer hitch will also be installed if the vehicle is equipped with an aftermarket unit, again if the vehicle’s condition supports proper installation. For any vehicle with an original equipment trailer hitch installed, the area around the hitch will be inspected, and if an installation problem is found, it will be resolved free of charge.

Jeep Grand Cherokee (WJ platform) model years 1999-2004 are not part of the safety recall; however, Chrysler has agreed to issue a customer satisfaction notice to owners, with an offer to inspect aftermarket trailer hitches for sharp edges or other puncture risks, and if necessary, replace them.

Used Electric Vehicle Values Decline Sharply

Values for used plug-in electric vehicles are expected to decline nearly 30 percent this year – the highest depreciation out of all vehicle segments, according to the NADA Used Car Guide in its latest report.

“The steep rate of depreciation for used plug-in electric vehicles can be attributed to limited range, manufacturer incentives and federal tax credits intended to offset the higher prices of new plug-in electric vehicles,” said Jonathan Banks, executive automotive analyst for the NADA Used Car Guide.

“Generous tax credits can certainly promote more new sales than would have been achieved otherwise, but they also have a negative impact on future resale values for one basic reason – few consumers are willing to purchase a credit-ineligible, used plug-in electric vehicle for more than they would pay for a new one, less the federal tax credit,” Banks added. “So at a minimum, late-model used plug-in EV prices must logically max out below the manufacturer’s suggested retail price minus the credit.”

Considering the limited range of plug-in electric vehicles – coupled with substantial incentives, tax credits and moderating gas prices – NADA estimates the annual rate of depreciation for used plug-in electric vehicles won’t improve much over the next two years, with annual losses going from 31.5 percent in 2012 to 29.7 percent in 2013 and 27.4 percent in 2014.

TARDEC, U-M Researchers Work to Make Soldiers Safer

Transportation crashes have accounted for two-thirds of U.S. noncombat military deaths since 2000 – a trend University of Michigan researchers are hoping to help reverse.

Research professor Matthew Reed and colleagues at the U-M Transportation Research Institute and U.S. Army Tank Automotive Research, Development and Engineering Center (TARDEC) aim to make seating in military vehicles safer, more effective and more comfortable for soldiers.

Previous studies of seated anthropometry – measurement of height, weight and proportions of the human body – have not included the impact of protective gear worn by soldiers on their posture and body shape.

“Current and future military vehicle programs face major challenges in providing adequate accommodation for soldiers while ensuring performance and safety,” Reed said. “Current design guidance is based on outdated anthropometry.”

Reed says that military vehicle programs lack detailed information on soldier posture and body shape, including the effects of personal protective equipment for seat and vehicle interior layout.

Reed and colleagues collected data from more than 300 soldiers – men and women of all shapes and sizes – at three U.S. Army bases in 2012. Using laser scanning and three-dimensional measurements, they analyzed the vehicle seating positions of soldiers – both drivers and crew, with and without their protective equipment and other gear – relative to the steering wheel, pedals, foot position and seat height and angles.

“The Seated Soldier Study: New Data and Tools for Soldier-Centered Design of Vehicles” is the first large-scale study of soldier posture and body shape in seated environments.

Results are being integrated

into both commercial tools and TARDEC’s internal design and assessment software, and will be integrated into more Army program tools and procedures.

The research was funded by TARDEC through the Automotive Research Center, a U-M-based U.S. Army Center of Excellence for modeling and simulation of ground vehicles.

Reed and TARDEC colleagues gave the first public presentation of the research at the Automotive Research Center’s annual program review at U-M on June 5.

The research also was highlighted at the Second International Digital Human Modeling Symposium June 11-13 at the Michigan Union on the U-M campus.

Hosted by the U-M Transportation Research Institute and the OPEN Design Lab at Penn State University, the conference featured more than 80 research presentations from scholars and industry experts from around the world.

For more information, see <http://www.dhm2013.org>.

Microsoft Offers Technology to Auto Suppliers

Microsoft Corp. announced patent licensing agreements with automotive technology companies Audiovox, Continental, Harman and LG Automotive for the use of its Extended File Allocation Table (exFAT) file system.

Microsoft’s exFAT allows automototech companies to meet increasing consumer demand for connected cars that let drivers and passengers transport media between all their favorite devices, including their automobiles. exFAT facilitates large files for audiovisual media and enables seamless data portability between electronic devices. According to a report from Accenture, the in-vehicle infotainment and telematics global market is predicted to exceed \$80 billion by 2014. exFAT supports the high-capacity SDXC memory card standard, which is increasingly used for music, pictures, videos and maps for navigation systems and USB-based storage devices.

“The exchange of intellectual property makes it possible for companies to bring great ideas to market quickly, and keep pace with customer demand,” said David Kaefer, general manager of intellectual property licensing, Microsoft.

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