

MP says bill will cover pot holes in transport legislation

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By Mike De Souza, Canwest News Service

OTTAWA — With no clear definition of a "safety-related defect" in the existing laws for motor vehicles, federal Liberal transport critic Joe Volpe says a new piece of legislation he is proposing will increase the powers of Transport Canada to keep Canadian roads safe.

Volpe's private member's bill, the Pedal Act, was inspired by concerns that Toyota vehicles with a defective accelerator were left on the roads for too long before the company issued a massive recall in January 2010.

"The more digging that we went through, the more we discovered that, in our opinion, there appeared to be vacuums in the legislation that prevented the government from exerting its authority on a manufacturer that was at the time, to all appearances, trying to do the minimum," Volpe said in an interview on Wednesday.

"My bill is designed to tighten that up and to give Transport Canada more prescriptive powers, greater authority."

Volpe explained that e-mails released at parliamentary hearings into the Toyota recall have demonstrated that Transport Canada had raised safety concerns about the vehicles last fall, but were forced to rely on the manufacturer to conclude whether it was a safety or quality issue.

The new legislation, to be debated in the House of Commons on Thursday, would define "safety-related defects" as anything beyond the control of the driver that puts him, her, or anyone else on the road in danger, said Volpe, the MP for Eglinton-Lawrence in Toronto.

"The focus is on the consumer," he said. "It's not about attacking Toyota. It's not about attacking anybody. It's about making sure that the connection between the regulator and the manufacturer is an effective one."

A senior Transport Canada official, Gerard McDonald, has already said this week that the department is reviewing Volpe's proposal to address concerns about the time it took to initiate the recall.

The new legislation also proposes to give the federal transport minister the power to initiate a recall, and requires manufacturers to submit quarterly reports to the government on safety-related issues. The manufacturers would also be required, under the proposed legislation, to install a brake-override system in vehicles with electronic-throttle control.

A spokesman for Transport Minister John Baird said the government is considering all legal options to keep Canadians safe and that it expects all manufacturers to be fully accountable and transparent in identifying potential problems that raise safety concerns.

"Regarding proposed changes to the Act, the minister is currently reviewing Mr. Volpe's bill, but has stated on several occasions that if we can make Canadian laws safer to better protect consumers in the future, he would be pleased to work with all parties in the House of Commons on a non-partisan basis to do so," said Baird's spokesman James Kusie.

Volpe said he has spoken to members from all sides of the House and believes there is general support to strengthen the existing legislation and move his bill through Parliament over the coming months. But he added that he would be happy if the government chooses to introduce the proposed measures in its own legislation to ensure that it can be adopted as soon as possible.

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