

Investigator 'surprised' Toyota didn't share complaints

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Transport Canada received 17 complaints about unexplained acceleration issues in Toyota vehicles in the three years before the company began a major series of safety recalls, government officials said Thursday.

But speaking at a parliamentary committee investigating the issue, a Transport Canada investigator also blasted the vehicle manufacturer for not sharing complaints about "sticky pedal" acceleration problems, in the midst of an investigation into the safety of floor mats interfering with pedals.

Trevor Lehouillier, the head of defect investigations and recalls, said the government was only informed by Toyota about the defect with accelerators in certain vehicle models on Jan. 21, several months after the company and the government had launched their own investigations into floor mats that were getting stuck on the accelerator.

The government said that Toyota had received five complaints regarding the sticky pedal problem in Canada, along with another five in the U.S., prior to issuing the recall and reporting the concern to the government.

"As you might imagine, I was quite surprised and appalled" that Toyota didn't inform the government it was aware of the sticky pedal safety concern, Lehouillier said in response to questions from Conservative MP Jeff Watson.

Opposition MPs who are on the committee questioned whether or not Transport Canada could have done more to investigate the complaints that it had received about acceleration problems between January 2006 and September 2009.

But the federal officials suggested that the complaints did not appear to be unusual when compared to feedback on other manufacturers.

"There was nothing in those complaints that would have given us (reason) for concern in Toyota vehicles," said Gerard A. McDonald, associate assistant deputy minister of the department's safety and security group.

When asked whether companies could conceal evidence of defects, Lehouillier said they were required by law to disclose safety concerns, but that "anything is possible."

In some heated exchanges with Liberal MP Joe Volpe and NDP MP Brian Masse, the officials said they had enough staff to monitor safety issues adequately and protect consumers. Masse also questioned why the government department had issued a release in the fall saying it "applauds" the manufacturer's efforts to improve vehicle safety.

But the officials said they investigate all of the concerns and potential defects.

Transport Canada also released its records on complaints received over the past 10 years from motorists regarding Toyota vehicles. Some of the cases made reference to motorists in Quebec who had learned about some of the risks from JE, a French-language consumer protection television show, prior to the official recall on Jan. 21.

They often included serious accidents that left many cars totalled after accelerating into other cars or walls, but sometimes were resolved without collisions.

The officials said there are no confirmed cases of fatalities related to the problem in Canada, and they are satisfied Toyota is meeting all of its legal obligations under vehicle safety legislation. Toyota officials are expected to appear before the parliamentary committee next week.