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U.S. House Committee Plans Hearing on Toyota Recall

By [MICHELINE MAYNARD](#)

DETROIT — [Toyota](#) faced heightened scrutiny on Thursday over problems with the accelerator pedals on its vehicles, as a House committee scheduled Congressional hearings into the matter and its recalls expanded to Europe and China.

The recalls were a significant blow to [Toyota](#), the world's biggest auto company, which had built its sales on a reputation for quality.

The company has temporarily stopping production and sales in the United States and Canada of eight models that could be affected by sticking pedals, and late Wednesday it expanded a previous recall in which buyers were told to remove the floor mats on their cars to avoid jamming the pedals.

Jake Fisher, a senior automotive engineer with Consumer Reports, said the situation was the most serious Toyota had faced in its half-century in the United States.

"There's been some cracks in the armor, but I don't think we've ever seen anything to this magnitude," Mr. Fisher said. "We've never seen multiple production lines shut down. If you go to a Toyota dealer right now, they can't sell you a Camry, they can't sell you a Corolla or a Highlander."

With the involvement of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, Toyota faced the most publicized investigation in the industry since problems with Firestone tires on [Ford](#) Explorers and other vehicles early last decade.

The committee announced that it would hold a hearing on Feb. 25 to examine consumer complaints about sudden unintended acceleration in Toyota vehicles.

In letters to the company and to the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration, the committee's chairman, [Henry A. Waxman](#), Democrat of California, asked to see documentation from Toyota and the agency on when they first learned about potential safety defects, as well as actions they had taken to investigate and resolve them.

The committee also asked for data on the agency's investigation of consumer complaints and Toyota's response to the complaints. "Like many consumers, I am concerned by the seriousness and scope of Toyota's recent recall announcements," Mr. Waxman said in a statement.

Toyota said it welcomed the opportunity to appear before the committee and pledged its full cooperation. "Helping ensure the safety of our customers and restoring confidence in Toyota are very important to our

company,” said a spokeswoman, Martha Voss.

The chairman of the committee’s panel on oversight and investigations, [Bart Stupak](#), a Democrat of Michigan, said meetings between the committee’s staff and Toyota on Wednesday had been helpful, but he said the lawmakers continued to have questions about the Toyota recalls.

The committee said sudden unintended acceleration in all Toyota vehicles had resulted in 19 deaths in the United States over the last decade. That is nearly twice the number of deaths associated with similar events in cars built by all other automakers combined.

The company that makes the pedals, CTS, has already started shipping replacements to Toyota plants, and Toyota said on Thursday that it was working with the manufacturer to develop and test modifications for existing vehicles.

In Europe, Toyota said it had not yet determined which models and how many vehicles would be affected by a recall there. But it added that it had already made the necessary changes to its production lines, so there would be no need to halt its output in Europe.

In China, the recall includes about 75,000 RAV4 sport utility vehicles made in 2009-10, the Chinese government’s product safety watchdog said on its Web site.

In addition, the [Ford Motor Company](#) said Thursday that it had stopped production of some commercial vehicles in China because they used the same accelerator pedals built by the [CTS Corporation](#), based in Elkhart, Ind., the supplier whose products led to Toyota’s recent recall.

Over the last three decades, Toyota has risen to become the world’s biggest carmaker and second-biggest in the United States, in part because of the loyalty of its buyers, who became evangelists for the automaker’s vehicles. “A lot of Toyota buyers never set foot in a competitor’s dealership,” Mr. Fisher said.

The company’s image was also helped within the business community by its management philosophy, which stressed continuous improvement and a production system that allowed workers to slow or stop the assembly line if problems arose.

Kevin L. Meyer, president of the Factory Strategies Group in Morro Bay, Calif., who has studied the company for more than 15 years, said he became concerned in 2007 when Toyota recalled its [Lexus ES 350](#) and [Toyota Camry](#) for sudden unintended acceleration, but did not seem to follow up with other vehicles.

In this case, he said it was not clear to him and other students of Toyota whether the company’s latest efforts were in line with its operating philosophies, or simply a bid at damage control.

“I think that’s the big debate right now,” Mr. Meyer said. “Is Toyota going back to its roots and protecting consumers because it is the right thing to do? Or are they doing it because of legal considerations?”

John Paul MacDuffie, a management professor at the Wharton School at the [University of Pennsylvania](#), said the public reaction to the recalls demonstrated that Toyota had to take major steps to address the problem — “the corporate equivalent of stopping the line,” he said.

“Reputations take a long time to build up and they can be damaged quickly,” he added. “Right now it’s all very chaotic, and it looks pretty bad.”

Micheline Maynard reported from Detroit, and Hiroko Tabuchi from Tokyo. David Jolly contributed reporting from Paris and Nick Bunkley from Detroit.

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