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U.S. Agrees to Disclose Chrysler Minivan Crash Test Data  
Courts: Lawyers for the government say they will release a videotape and other materials involving the safety of rear-hatch latches on the vehicles.

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TEXT:

WASHINGTON - Under pressure from an activist's lawsuit and facing a skeptical federal judge, government lawyers announced Monday that they intend to make public a videotape of crash tests focusing on the controversial rear-hatch latches of Chrysler minivans.

The agreement to release the videotape and other materials by the end of October was revealed in court here by lawyers representing the government and a safety consultant who has sued an agency of the Department of Transportation to obtain the data.

The judge overseeing the dispute over release of the materials also questioned why none of the latches have yet been replaced. Chrysler and federal transportation officials had announced March 27 that the company, while maintaining that the original latches are safe, would replace the components at no cost to concerned vehicle owners. But the new latches are not yet available to minivan owners.

"Why in the world has it taken four to five months to get a prototype of these latches when you know full well that it takes months (longer) for consumers to actually get their vans in, to get the repairs made, for Chrysler to do what it's supposed to do?" U.S. District Judge Gladys Kessler asked a lawyer for the government.

"What in the world has taken so long, while these vehicles are on the road, being driven by families with children in those vans?" she added.

Failure of the latches may have contributed to the deaths of 37 people and injuries to 76 others, according to investigative reports compiled as of mid-July by the federal Department of Transportation.

Patricia Russotto, a lawyer for the department's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, told Kessler that the replacement latches still must undergo physical testing to ensure their adequacy.

A Chrysler spokesman said last week that in September, the company hopes to begin contacting the first of more than 4 million van owners who would be eligible to have rear latches replaced. A Chrysler lawyer earlier had argued against release of the government's videotape, saying that the result would be a flood of demands for new latches.

Lewis H. Goldfarb, assistant general counsel for Chrysler, said that the company's efforts to replace the latches have been slowed by the difficulty of designing a related, remote-release component that is standard in the 1990s models. Kessler, he said, "really didn't understand" the design issue.

As evidenced by Kessler's comments, the dispute over the status of the videotape and other government investigative data has refocused attention on the Transportation Department's compromise agreement with Chrysler in March.

Safety activists have criticized the Clinton Administration for deciding not to declare the latches defective or to seek a formal recall.

In the event of a recall, an auto maker is subject to increased penalties and vehicle owners are informed, unambiguously, that a safety problem exists.

Under the compromise agreement announced in March, Chrysler has stated in television and print-media ads that the original latches are safe and that the government has not found otherwise but that replacements would nonetheless be offered.

In an interview, Philip R. Recht, a presidential appointee who is deputy director of the highway safety administration, said that the agreement with Chrysler was intended to avoid the delays of protracted litigation.

"We have got to keep our eye on the long-term goal here, which is safety," Recht said.

Yet in court Monday, Kessler took issue with the agency's handling of the latch-replacement matter. Kessler said that when the highway safety agency announced the agreement with Chrysler in March, no indication was given that it would take so long to accommodate minivan owners seeking to replace their original latches.

By the time Chrysler begins replacing the first of the latches, Kessler said, "we are talking about an eight- or nine-month delay between the time of an announcement that got a whole lot of publicity--I think it's fair to say favorable publicity, for the government and the manufacturer--and the time in which any consumer can actually take advantage of that offer in order to make their vehicle safer for themselves and their family. . . . I find that a bit disturbing.

"I think the (highway safety administration's March 27) press release certainly suggested something different to the public and that is of great concern to me," the judge added.

As for the videotape and the other investigative materials, lawyers for the highway safety administration had contended that the data was exempt from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act because the agency has not formally closed its investigation of the minivan latches. The exemption

they cited allows an agency to withhold data if disclosure "could reasonably be expected to interfere with enforcement proceedings."

Russotto said that the government expects to close its investigation by mid-October.

Katherine A. Meyer, a lawyer for Ralph Hoar, the consultant who sued to force disclosure of the investigative materials, reiterated Monday that she believes the government's earlier compromise agreement with Chrysler marked the end of that investigation.

The materials Hoar is seeking, in addition to the videotape, include the "analysis, conclusions and recommendations" of the highway safety administration's staff. The agency showed all of the data to Chrysler's lawyers on Nov. 17, 1994.

Kessler said that if the government does not make public the videotape and the other materials by Oct. 30, "then I am certainly anxious for this case to proceed quickly."

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