

**Statement of Chairman John McCain
Ford/Firestone Tire Recall Hearing
September 12, 2000**

Good morning, I want to thank the witnesses for their presence. This morning's hearing is important for a variety of reasons. It will offer the Committee and the public an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the recall of 14.4 million Firestone tires. More important, it will begin the process for this Committee and hopefully this Congress to examine and improve the policies of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to detect defects, and enhance the obligation of industry to provide safe vehicles to consumers.

While a great deal has been said by many people over the past few weeks about this problem, the fact remains that our attention to ensuring the safety of the driving public is fleeting. It unfortunately takes the cumulative tragedy of more than 80 lives to bring our collective attention to the long overdue task of reforming the way we investigate and remedy vehicle defects.

Let me be clear, it is not my intention to use today's hearing to lay blame upon any individual, company or government agency. The liability of the parties involved will be appropriately determined through ongoing investigations and eventually the courts.

The fact is we all share the blame equally when the system fails. Congress sometimes interferes with government regulators in the prosecution of their duties. Industry can be too focused on profits rather than the safety of the public. And agencies can become bureaucracies more concerned with paperwork than advancing the very causes they were created to serve.

Serious questions remain about what Ford and Firestone knew of this problem and when they knew it. The mounting evidence is making it increasingly difficult to credibly believe that neither of these companies knew anything of this problem until late this summer. A recent Washington Post article cites a Firestone report from mid-1998 that shows a dramatic increase in customer claims on one of the tires that is subject to this recall. Furthermore, annual claims reports from Firestone show an increase in claims associated with the tires subject to the recall beginning in 1996 through 1999. Ford also received numerous complaints about Firestone tires on Explorers in overseas markets. These complaints were significant enough to cause Ford to replace tires in 16 foreign countries. Taken individually each of these incidents may not be cause for alarm. But taken collectively it is difficult to believe that no one realized this was a problem until a month ago. Both Ford and Firestone owe the American people an explanation for why it took them so long to act in this country.

I cite this article not as evidence of guilt but as an example of the problems with the current system. Currently, NHTSA plays the role of a toothless and declawed cat in a game of cat and mouse with automakers. The current system must be changed. When manufacturers fail to tell the truth or purposely neglect to report safety data, and people lose their lives, severe penalties must result. It is my intention to work with the ranking member and other members of the Committee to develop legislation to reform the process used to detect, investigate and recall defective vehicles. Two weeks

ago I wrote to Secretary Slater about this recall and asked for the Administration's recommendations to improve NHTSA's ability to detect defects. I look forward to hearing the Secretary's views on that today.

Additionally, I will ask the Inspector General to review the Office of Defects Investigations and make further recommendations on how to improve its functioning and ensure that it has the resources it needs to ensure the public's safety.

I am hopeful that today we can move beyond recriminations and toward the process of reform. Again, I want to thank the witnesses for their presence. I look forward to their testimony.

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