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Ford Admits Crown Vic Failed Crash Test

Automaker Provides Safer Technology to Civilian 'Protection' Car, but Not to Police

Ford Motor Company officials have admitted in sworn testimony that a Crown Victoria police car equipped with new fuel tank safety shields actually flunked its own crash test.

This disclosure and others were made today by Dallas City Attorney Madeleine Johnson, who is suing Ford in an attempt to discover if Ford's popular police cruiser is safe enough for police. Fourteen law enforcement officers have died in Crown Victoria fuel-fed fires after being rear-ended at high speeds.

Ford announced Sept. 27, it would install fuel tank shields on some 350,000 Crown Vic police cars, touting a crash test it claimed showed the shields effective at speeds up to 75 miles per hour. However, a Ford official acknowledged in a deposition taken last month that the crash-tested tank actually leaked more than 40 ounces of a fuel substitute known as Stoddard. Federal standards limit fuel tank leaks in crash tests to no more than one ounce.

"Instead of the success Ford claimed it was, the crash test obviously was an abject failure, and calls seriously into question Ford's claims that the new fuel tank shields are enough to solve Crown Vic fuel tank safety problems," Ms. Johnson said.

Ms. Johnson emphasized that even small fuel tank punctures can touch off fiery explosions since the fuel is expelled under pressure in the form of an aerosol-like mist and soon forms a vapor cloud that engulfs the vehicle.

"We know all too well this tragedy—we lost a member of our own family," Ms. Johnson said, referring to the death of Dallas Police Officer Patrick Metzler on Oct. 23, after his cruiser exploded when it was rear-ended.

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Dallas patrol cars have been equipped with the new shields, which obviously offer some protection from fuel tank puncture, Ms. Johnson noted. "But I will continue to press for answers from Ford officials about why they persisted with the shield 'fix' in light of the shield's failure to withstand high speeds, and why they have rejected other technologies offering greater protection," Ms. Johnson said.

For example, Johnson noted, Ford has announced it will begin production soon of a \$140,000 Lincoln Town Car with a fuel tank that self-seals if punctured. The new Lincoln 'Ballistic Protection Series' is designed to resist high-powered rifles and offer limited bomb-blast protection and has been in development for about two years, according to Ford.

This same technology was presented to a Ford technical task force last summer as a possible guard against Crown Vic police car fuel tank punctures, but was rejected as not being production ready, according to Ford documents and testimony.

"If this technology is now available, and obviously it has been for some time, why hasn't Ford offered this to police officers?" said Ms. Johnson. "As the leader in the police vehicle market, Ford has a big responsibility to say to law enforcement 'Your cars are as safe--or safer-- than any vehicle we make.' "

We learned today from Ford that it will produce only 12,500 trunk safety packs a year, but there are more than 300,000 affected police cars on the road. The trunk packs, promised by the end of 2002, will be provided to police to store heavy objects that might be propelled through the trunk and into the fuel tank in a rear-end collision.

Until the packs become available, Ms. Johnson advised law enforcement agencies immediately to remove hard objects, or long stiff objects such as universal, 4-armed lug wrenches, from their trunks where possible. Only last month, a Texas Department of Public Safety vehicle operating in Bee County suffered a tank puncture when the corner of a videotape mounting bracket punctured the tank.

"It is shocking to learn that the tank, as designed, is endangered by ordinary radios and electronic equipment," Ms. Johnson said. "We currently are seeking to learn whether the trunk pack will accommodate this necessary police equipment."

Punctures from tank contents were involved in the deaths of Officer Robert Smith of Florida in 1997, Officer Hung Le of Louisiana in 1998, and Officer Skip Fink of Arizona in 2000.

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Ms. Johnson said the depositions also revealed that the trunk packs, which include a Kevlar sheet, will cost \$210 each, quadruple Ford's original estimate.

Ford has indicated it does not intend to cover the costs of providing trunk packs, but that this must be done at the law enforcement agencies' expense.

"We continue to maintain Ford has an obligation to provide trunk safety kits to police free of charge, and we will continue to press Ford on this issue," Ms. Johnson said.

Ford repeatedly has claimed that the technology does not exist to protect fuel tanks from puncture or leaks in a high-speed, rear end crash. Ms. Johnson said that depositions have confirmed that Ford consistently has refused to adopt readily available fuel tank safety technology from a number of sources. The Crown Victoria, manufactured for 24 years, has the oldest unchanged design of any car on the market. The longer a car goes without a redesign, the more profitable it is.

Deposition information so far also reveals a startling lack of action on the part of Ford to design a 'fix' of fuel tank problems that actually reflects the types of fuel tank damage that have led to fires and deaths, Ms. Johnson said.

"If I sound frustrated with Ford, it's because I am," said Ms. Johnson. "They say one thing in public, and another in sworn testimony. We've been at this for months, and we can't say for sure that our officers are a whole lot safer."

The City of Dallas and others suing Ford over the Crown Victoria police car are gathering sworn testimony from Ford officials as part of a consolidated discovery process before a federal judge in Cleveland. Ms. Johnson filed suit against Ford seeking Crown Victoria safety information last December in the wake of Officer Metzler's death.

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