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Tuesday, March 4, 2003

Activists attack Ford gas-tank fix

Consumer groups claim secret recall in effect for sedans

By Jeff Plungis / Detroit News Washington Bureau

DETROIT -- A consumer advocacy group is pressing four states to enforce "secret warranty" laws against Ford Motor Co. over repairs to its Crown Victoria sedan.

The Washington-based Center for Auto Safety alleges that Ford is offering fuel tank shield kits for the Crown Victoria, Mercury Grand Marquis, and Lincoln Town Car at a price below the company's cost -- a practice some watchdog groups say amounts to an unannounced, secret safety campaign.

California, Wisconsin, Virginia and Connecticut all have warranty laws designed to force manufacturers to admit safety or quality problems and notify customers about repair campaigns.

The Crown Victoria has come under scrutiny from law enforcement agencies and safety officials following deadly fires involving police officers driving the Crown Victoria Police Inceptor. At least a dozen officers have perished in fires after high-speed rear-impact collisions involving the Crown Victoria since 1996.

"Civilians ride at risk of a rear collision fire in the Crown Victorias," said Clarence Ditlow, executive director of the Center for Auto Safety. "They deserve to have the same protection police officers do."

Ditlow said he was raising the issue because the \$105 repair kit Ford is offering to civilians appears to be at least partially subsidized by the company. Ditlow compared the fuel-tank shields with plastic bumper covers that cost \$300 or more.

Ford spokeswoman Kristen Kinley said the cost of the fuel-tank kits were not being subsidized. The kits are offered to consumers at cost, like any other enhancement, she said.

Ford denies there is a problem with the cars and says it is offering the repair kits only to civilians who request it. The company estimates the risk of a fire-related death is at least 1,000 times as great for a police officer than for a civilian.

Kinley said Ford would have no further comment until company executives reviewed the center's request and the laws in the four states.

"Obviously, we will comply with any law," Kinley said.

Warranty laws vary from state to state, but they usually include a



Ford Crown Victoria

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requirement that a company notify every consumer of the availability of a repair and a fine, Ditlow said.

In a related matter, Dallas city attorney Madeleine Johnson, based on a deposition in the city's lawsuit with Ford, is charging that the Crown Vic police cruiser repair kits have failed an internal company crash test.

Johnson said a shield-protected tank leaked 40 ounces of fuel in a company crash test, according to a Ford official deposed in a city lawsuit over police cruiser safety. Federal rules allow fuel tanks to leak up to 1 ounce in crash tests, Johnson said.

But Kinley said the 75-mph crash test Ford conducted was designed to measure only whether the tank would suffer a puncture, and it did not.

Kinley said the 1-ounce government performance standard applies to a 30-mph crash test, not the 75-mph test that Ford conducted.

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