

Crown Vic faces further scrutiny

Attorneys general task force to probe Ford police interceptors over fire-related deaths

By Jeff Plungis / Detroit News Washington Bureau

Crown Vic questions

The National Association of Attorneys General will investigate the safety of Crown Victoria police cruisers. It's the latest obstacle in Ford's attempt to get beyond the controversy over police officers who have died in Crown Vic fires. Recent developments:

Dallas is conducting its own crash tests after saying Ford's tests were flawed. The city has suspended Crown Vic purchases.

Numerous cities and counties have joined forces in a class-action lawsuit, seeking a recall, damages and internal company engineering information.

U.S. Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., called for a new federal investigation into Crown Vic safety after a state trooper died in Missouri in May.

WASHINGTON -- The nation's attorneys general formed a task force Friday to investigate the safety of Ford's Crown Victoria Police Interceptor. The bipartisan National Association of Attorneys General took the step at the group's national meeting in Oklahoma City.

The probe is the latest in a string of actions by states and cities concerned about the safety record of the Crown Vic. Since 1996, more than a dozen police officers have died in fires when their cruisers were struck from behind.

The attorneys general heard presentations from Ford Motor Co. and a plaintiff's attorney involved in Crown Vic lawsuits.

After the presentations, the association's newly elected president, California Attorney General Bill Lockyer, a Democrat, asked a team of attorneys general to investigate the controversy.

Florida Attorney General Charlie Crist raised the Crown Victoria issue before the group.

A spokeswoman for Crist said law enforcement officials in Florida have expressed concern about the Crown Victoria after fire-related deaths there. At least three officers have died since 1997.

"We are continuing to look at the issue," said JoAnn Carrin, Crist's spokeswoman. "We are making sure our law enforcement authorities are aware of the situation and know about all of their options."

Few details about the task force were available Friday. A spokeswoman for Lockyer confirmed the Crown Victoria presentations took place.

"They did have a discussion, and they expressed interest in getting more information," said California attorney general spokeswoman Hallye Jordan.

Ford spokeswoman Francine Romine said the company would cooperate with the attorneys general in their probe.

"We have an excellent track record in working with different organizations who have expressed concern," Romine said.

Ford controls about 85 percent of the police cruiser market. The Crown Vic, one of the last full-size rear-wheel drive sedans in the U.S. market, is a favorite of police departments, who like its power and handling.

In September, Ford agreed to install a set of plastic shields around the fuel tanks of all police cruisers. The action followed negotiations with Arizona Attorney General Janet Napolitano, who asked Ford for a full recall of the Crown Vic.

Napolitano, a Democrat, is now Arizona's governor.

Last month, Ford sent an eight-page letter to 30,000 police departments with an update on its Crown Vic safety plan.

Ford has also given presentations to numerous police organizations about the Crown Victoria's design, testing and accident statistics, Romine said.

Despite the company's efforts, law enforcement officials remain concerned.

* On May 29, the Dallas city council voted to suspend purchases of Crown Vic cruisers.

* Earlier in May, the Chicago police union asked the city to back out of a plan to buy a new fleet of Crown Vics.

* The National Association of Police Organizations Inc. filed a lawsuit in federal court in January charging that Ford failed to fix defective fuel tanks on the Crown Vic.

* Louisiana Attorney General Richard Ieyoub issued a moratorium Jan. 18 on Crown Vic police cruisers.

Safety advocates say the Crown Vic's fuel tank, located behind the rear axle in the vehicle's "crush zone," is prone to rupture and leak fuel.

Ford says the cruiser exceeds federal safety standards and has an excellent overall safety record.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration closed an investigation into the fuel tanks of the Crown Victoria, the Mercury Grand Marquis and the Lincoln Town Car last year without finding a defect.

You can reach Jeff Plungis at (202) 662-7378 or plungis@detnews.com.