

[FordForums](#) > [Vehicle Specific Discussions](#) > [Ford Cars](#) > [Crown Victoria | Grand Marquis](#) > C&P Ford C/V's No more sales to some Dept's.!

View Thread: [C&P Ford C/V's No more sales to some Dept's.!](#)

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Ford cuts off suing police

It won't take their Crown Vic orders

BY JOCELYN PARKER - Saturday, July 19, 2003 "DETROIT FREE PRESS", Detroit, Michigan

Police departments suing Ford Motor Co. over alleged fuel-tank defects in Crown Victoria police cars can no longer purchase the vehicles, Ford said Friday.

In the last week or so, Ford sent letters, dated July 10, to 36 police departments that are part of a class-action against the company informing them that the automaker no longer will accept orders for Crown Victoria Police Interceptors from them because they are demanding "unrealistic vehicle crash performance specifications."

"Obviously we can't provide vehicles to customers who are suing us," said Ford spokeswoman Kristen Kinley. The basis of the suit is "built on the belief that these tanks will never leak. There's no manufacturer in the world that can meet that requirement."

News of Ford's refusal to sell Crown Victorias to certain departments comes days after the City of Dallas reported crash-tests results that put one of Ford's safety devices for the Crown Victoria into question. Dallas officials said Ford's Trunk Packs, which are supposed to protect the fuel tank from sharp equipment during rear-end crashes, may increase fuel leakage during some accidents.

The Trunk Packs, which are available for \$250, can hold sharp items such as axes and crow bars. Ford touts the packs as safety devices.

Ford's Crown Victoria, the overwhelming vehicle of choice among police officers and state troopers, has been the subject of several lawsuits and a federal investigation because of fuel-tank fires following high-speed, rear collisions. About 85 percent of all police departments and state troopers use the vehicles.

Fuel-tank fires following high-speed, rear collisions have killed at least 12 officers over the last few years.

About a year ago, Ford volunteered to retrofit the 350,000 Crown Victoria police cars on the road with fuel-tank shields and formed a panel to review fuel-tank components. In May, Crown Victoria sedans got the highest safety rating from federal regulators in annual crash tests.

Many police departments said Ford's fixes for the vehicle aren't enough to protect their officers. Some agencies have urged Ford to install fuel-tank bladders on the vehicles, which are reinforced liners for fuel tanks. Others have suggested that Ford totally redesign the vehicle and have looked for other vehicle options outside of Ford.

Recently, the New York State Police Department said it is in talks with other automakers about getting different police cars.

Plaintiffs that still buy Crown Victoria police cars include Indianapolis; Jefferson Parish, La., and Hoover, Ala.

Ford said it doesn't know how many sales will be lost due to its refusal to sell to plaintiffs, but it expects the impact to be small. Of about 30,000 law enforcement departments that buy the cars, more than 99.7 percent of them have chosen not to file or join a class action against it, Ford said.

Year-to-date Crown Victoria sales are up 3.7 percent.

Lawyers and safety experts said that Ford's response is irresponsible and will likely cause lower sales of the vehicle in the long run. The Chrysler Group of DaimlerChrysler AG and General Motors Corp. are already aiming to take a chunk of the police market away from Ford.

"Ford is very arrogant toward consumers who have complained about legitimate problems," said Clarence Ditlow, executive director for the Center for Auto Safety.

"This could be a way for other automakers to get back into the police market," he added.

Madeleine Johnson, the city attorney representing the City of Dallas, which also received a letter, said Dallas will continue to fight to make the vehicles safer.

"I don't know what" Ford's "motive is, but my motive is to get the car as safe as I can," Johnson said. "We have police officers whose lives are at risk."

Dallas filed a lawsuit against Ford late last year to obtain information regarding the safety of Crown Victorias. The suit followed the death of officer Patrick Metzler, who burned to death in a Crown Victoria last October.

Dallas hasn't purchased any Crown Victoria police cars since last year.

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