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Feds probe charges of SUV transmission hazards

Investigation launched after AJC report on consumer complaints

By ALISON YOUNG
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
Wednesday, April 29, 2009

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has opened a formal investigation into consumer allegations that certain Ford Explorers and Mercury Mountaineers can unexpectedly slip out of park, federal records show.

The defect investigation was launched April 21, two days after The Atlanta Journal-Constitution highlighted consumer complaints about the problem and the case of a local woman who claims she's a paraplegic because her Explorer shifted from park to reverse and ran over her.

• [Read the AJC's original report](#)

"A preliminary evaluation has been opened to assess the scope, frequency and potential safety consequences of the alleged defect and any relationship of the alleged gearshift lever mechanism failures to the alleged vehicle rollaway incidents," according to the defect investigation document. Regulators are looking at 2002 through 2005 model year Explorers and Mountaineers; about 1.4 million of these SUVs were produced.

NHTSA has received 11 complaints of vehicle rollaways after the driver shifted the vehicle into park. In addition, 61 other vehicle owners have alleged failure of the gear shift lever mechanism while shifting from or to the park position, the document says.

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"We do not see a safety risk and we will be fully cooperating with the government with the investigation," Ford spokesman Wes Sherwood said Wednesday.

Jessica Mundy, whose spine was fractured when she was run over by her 2004 Ford Explorer after she got out to mail a package in McDonough, is currently suing Ford Motor Company in a lawsuit filed in DeKalb County. She was 22 at the time.

In court records Mundy alleges she is a paraplegic because of a transmission design defect that caused her Explorer to unexpectedly shift from park to reverse. The suit alleges that the defect also allows drivers to put the shifter in what appears to be park — but really isn't.

Officials at Ford headquarters outside Detroit said in a written statement to the AJC earlier this month: "While our sympathies go out to Ms. Mundy and her family, we do not believe the Explorer or its transmission are defective or to blame for this tragic accident. We believe operator error led to the accident because Ms. Mundy failed to shift her vehicle into park before exiting the vehicle."

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