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U.S. Ends Chevy Volt Battery Fire Probe

By Angela Greiling Keane - Jan 21, 2012

U.S. regulators, who ended their investigation yesterday into the Chevrolet Volt, said electric-powered vehicles do not pose a greater risk of fire than gasoline cars.

“Based on the available data, NHTSA does not believe that Chevy Volts or other electric vehicles pose a greater risk of fire than gasoline-powered vehicles,” the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said in an e-mailed statement.

The conclusion by NHTSA came two weeks after General Motors Co. (GM) told Volt owners to bring the vehicles to dealerships for repair.

The government started investigating the Volt after a side- impact crash test in May led to a fire three weeks later. During that test, the lithium-ion battery pack broke open and coolant leaked into the battery. When the car was physically rotated as part of the test, more coolant leaked into a circuit board, leading to a fire. NHTSA replicated the fire in November and started an official probe Nov. 25.

“GM is proud of the technological innovation the Volt represents,” Greg Martin, a GM spokesman, said yesterday in an e-mailed statement. “We appreciate the confidence our Volt customers continued to provide during the investigation.”

Post-Crash Fire

The June fire occurred following a May 12 crash test at a facility in Wisconsin run by contractor MGA Research Inc., which notified the regulator that the blaze burned a line of cars parked near the Volt, NHTSA said yesterday in its report.

The agency and its investigators concluded in July that the fire originated in the Volt battery and performed another side- impact test on a Volt in September. That crash, which didn’t penetrate the battery compartment, didn’t lead to a fire. NHTSA, which tested Volt batteries in November with the Energy and Defense departments, hadn’t previously disclosed the September crash test.

The June Volt fire was reported Nov. 11 by Bloomberg.

The Volt blaze had little effect on sales of the vehicles, so there may not be any significant improvement with the government completing its investigation, said Jeremy Anwyl, vice chairman of auto-researcher Edmunds.com, in an e-mail.

"Volt buyers tend to be passionate about their vehicle," Anwyl said. "They really want an electrified vehicle. The small risk represented by the potential for fire wouldn't have been an obstacle for this group of buyers."

New Technology

The attention focused on the Volt fire was, in part, a result of the vehicle's new technology, Anwyl said.

"We see gasoline powered vehicles blow up in the movies all the time," he said. "A vehicle with batteries catches fire and it is portrayed as a big deal."

Representative Darrell Issa, the California Republican who is chairman of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, plans to hold a hearing on Jan. 25 about the fires and the regulator's handling of the incidents. GM Chief Executive Officer Dan Akerson and NHTSA Administrator David Strickland are scheduled to testify.

Issa has asked whether President Barack Obama's administration kept silent about the fires because of its interest in the success of GM's government-backed restructuring and a U.S. goal of having 1 million electric vehicles on the road by 2015.

Information Not Withheld

U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood told reporters in December it was "absolutely not true" that his agency withheld information about the Volt's safety.

GM, based in Detroit, said Jan. 5 it would provide a fix to the 8,000 plug-in hybrids it has sold, to reduce the risk of a post-crash fire. Strickland said in Detroit Jan. 8 that the agency was pleased with GM's plan.

The Treasury Department owns 32 percent of GM's stock, according to data compiled by Bloomberg.

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Chevrolet Volt catches fire weeks after crash, prompting closer look at safety

Following a fire in a Chevrolet Volt several weeks after a crash test, government officials are weighing the need for new safety rules that could require first responders to drain electric vehicles' batteries after a crash.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said today it had investigated a fire that occurred this spring, after the Volt extended-range electric vehicle underwent a 20 mile-per-hour, side-impact test for its five-star crash safety rating. The crash punctured the Volt's lithium-ion battery, and after more than three weeks of sitting outside, the vehicle and several cars around it caught fire. No one was hurt.

General Motors believes the fire occurred because NHTSA did not drain the energy from the Volt's battery following the crash, which is a safety step the automaker recommends, GM spokesman Rob Peterson said. NHTSA had not been told of the safety protocol, Peterson said.

Still, none of the other Volts the agency crash tested caught fire, even though they still had charged batteries, according to a NHTSA official who declined to be identified because of ongoing discussions with automakers.

"We don't want to make it sounds like this one incident could be the general case," the official said. "We don't see the risk of electric vehicles as being any greater than that for a gasoline vehicle."

This is the only crashed Volt ever to catch fire, GM spokesman Greg Martin said. NHTSA plans more testing of the Volt's battery.

The fire's cause – the battery puncture -- led to questions about whether other automakers require batteries to be discharged of their energy following major crashes, the NHTSA official said. In addition, regulators are exploring protocols for who would do that – firefighters who respond first, for instance – and how quickly should they do it.

NHTSA is now reviewing the responses it has received from automakers and waiting for additional information from some carmakers as well. The official said it is too early to tell if the agency will issue a rule on discharging batteries

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