

TOYOTA'S REVOLVING DOOR AND FAILING BRAKES

I've made a concerted effort to avoid piling on the Toyota recall story. But this excellent Bloomberg story—describing how two former National Highway Traffic Safety Administration officials helped Toyota avoid more comprehensive responses to its brake failures on four different occasions—deserves a lot of attention.

Former regulators hired by Toyota Motor Corp. helped end at least four U.S. investigations of unintended acceleration by company vehicles in the last decade, warding off possible recalls, court and government records show. Christopher Tinto, vice president of regulatory affairs in Toyota's Washington office, and Christopher Santucci, who works for Tinto, helped persuade the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to end probes including those of 2002-2003 Toyota Camrys and Solaras, court documents show. Both men joined Toyota directly from NHTSA, Tinto in 1994 and Santucci in 2003.

[snip]

NHTSA opened eight investigations of unintended acceleration of Toyota vehicles from 2003 to 2010, according to Safety Research & Strategies Inc., a Rehoboth, Massachusetts, group that gathers data from NHTSA and other sources for plaintiff's attorneys and consumers. Three of the probes resulted in recalls for floor mats. Five were closed, meaning NHTSA found no evidence of a defect.

In four of the five cases that were closed, Tinto and Santucci worked with

NHTSA on Toyota's responses to the consumer complaints the agency was investigating, agency documents show.

Here are the four known investigations that were limited or squelched:

March 2004: NHTSA limits investigation of throttle control system to unintended acceleration events lasting less than a minute, seemingly dismissing longer unintended acceleration problems because driver may have used the wrong pedal. (114 similar cases found)

2005: NHTSA ends investigation after Toyota tells it there was "no evidence of a system or component failure was found and the vehicles were operating as designed" (100 cases found; 59 investigated)

August 2006: Toyota says it finds "no abnormality in the throttle actuator, or controller, which the petitioner blamed," but does find "evidence that returned actuators had corroded due to water intrusion caused by circumstances 'such as driving through a flooded road, in the heavy rain or a hurricane' and a drain hose was modified to prevent future water intrusion" (3,546 cases addressed under warranty)

2008: Toyota says it "couldn't find enough evidence to support allegations of unintended acceleration in 2006-2007 Toyota Tacoma pickup trucks" (478 incidents reported)

One thing that becomes clear from this is that there have been a significant (though not huge) number of complaints on these issues. While I can't be sure, it seems that at least one of these was only addressed at the dealer level, which would not be able to determine a bigger electronic issue.

Now, as the article makes clear, there's no evidence that the two former NHTSA employees did anything improper in their work with Toyota. But it does appear these former NHTSA knew how to game the system to make sure NHTSA decided it wasn't worth its time to investigate as each new complaint surfaced.