

**Opening Statement of the Honorable Fred Upton
Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations
Hearing on “The GM Ignition Switch Recall: Why Did It Take So Long?”
April 1, 2014**

(As Prepared for Delivery)

With a two-ton piece of high-velocity machinery, there is zero margin for error; product safety is a life or death issue. But sadly, vehicle safety has fallen short. And it's not the first time. During the late summer of 2000, in this very room, I led the oversight hearings that examined the Ford-Firestone recalls. A tire malfunction was causing violent crashes, and Americans did not feel safe behind the wheel. We gathered testimony from company and agency officials and reviewed thousands of documents. And we found that the system had failed. Information about the defective tires had been shared with the companies and with NHTSA. The parties failed to protect the public's safety, and over 100 people died.

After that investigation, I introduced the TREAD Act to correct many of the problems that contributed to the Ford-Firestone tragedy. That bill was meant to ensure data about safety is reported so that defects can be quickly identified and fixed – and lives can be saved.

The TREAD Act has been law since November 2000, yet here we are, investigating another safety failure. It's déjà vu all over again. One month ago, GM issued a recall for an ignition switch defect in six vehicles, totaling 1.6 million cars. Last Friday, they recalled another 900,000 vehicles. GM acknowledges that 12 people have died in automobile crashes associated with this defect. Two were teenagers from southwest Michigan.

Testifying today are GM CEO Mary Barra and NHTSA Acting Administrator David Friedman, a first step in our quest to find out what went wrong. The committee's purpose is the same as in 2000: making sure drivers and families are protected and cars are safe.

I will repeat what I said at the first oversight hearing on Firestone tires in 2000: “today's hearing is very personal to me, because I come from Michigan, the auto state, the auto capital of the world.” That is no less true today. Michigan is proud of its auto industry, and while Michigan citizens build cars, we drive them, too.

Documents produced to the committee show that both NHTSA and GM received complaints and data about problems with ignition switches and airbags. These complaints go back at least 10 years. NHTSA engineers did crash investigations as early as 2005 and twice examined whether complaints with airbags constituted a trend. GM submitted Early Warning Reports to NHTSA, including data about crashes in the recalled cars. With all this information available, why did it take so long to issue the recall? In this case, just as it was with the Ford-Firestone affair, it was news reports that brought the problem to the nation's attention.

This investigation of the recall is bipartisan – as it should be. We will follow the facts where they lead us. And we will work until we have those answers, and can assure the public that they are safe.

I'd like to note that the Chairman of our Commerce, Manufacturing, and Trade Subcommittee, Mr. Terry, will be joining us for questions this afternoon. With his subcommittee's record on motor vehicle safety issues, he will be watching closely as this investigation unfolds so that he can take our findings and determine whether and what changes may be needed to our laws designed to keep drivers safe on the road. After all, our goal on every issue follows the “Dingell model” – identify the problem or abuse fully, and where needed, fix it with legislation so that it can't happen again.

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