

"Toyota driver: 'I prayed for God to help me' "

By Joseph Weber

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The congressional hearings on malfunctioning Toyotas began Tuesday with a motorist's harrowing account of her Lexus suddenly surging to 100 mph down an interstate as she tried desperately to bring the car under control.

"Nothing slowed the car," Rhonda Smith of Sevierville, Tenn., told a House Oversight and Investigations subcommittee.

Mrs. Smith said the 2006 incident started as she merged onto the highway and lasted more than seven minutes as she she tried the emergency brake and then put the transmission in neutral and reverse.

"I prayed for God to help me," said Mrs. Smith, who paused to hold back tears, then said she called her husband on a hands-free mobile phone.

"I knew he couldn't help me, but I wanted to hear his voice one last time," said Mrs. Smith, whose vehicle slowed to safety roughly six minutes later.

Her account followed opening statements by House lawmakers, including Rep. Bart Stupak, the subcommittee's chairman, who said the Japanese automaker misled customers and investigators about the problems and its efforts to fix them.

"Toyota's leadership has been ambiguous about whether the [vehicle] recall effort addressed the problem of sudden, unintended acceleration," Mr. Stupak, Michigan Democrat, said. "The fixes do not reassure customers."

Mr. Stupak also said Toyota deceived buyers by not revealing misplaced floor mats and sticking gas pedals accounted for only some of the acceleration problems. He said the company resisted the possibility that electronics problems were the cause.

The president of Toyota's U.S. operations, James E. Lentz, is expected to apologize today on Capitol Hill for the company's slow response to the malfunctions.

"In recent months, we have not lived up to the high standards our customers and the public have come to expect from Toyota," Mr. Lentz, president and chief operating officer of Toyota Motor Sales U.S.A., said in prepared remarks. "Put simply, it has taken us too long to come to grips with a rare but serious set of safety issues, despite all of our good faith efforts."

On Wednesday, Toyota Chief Executive Akio Toyoda will testify before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.

Also testifying Tuesday will be Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reports the sudden acceleration

problems have led to 19 deaths over the past 10 years.

The agency is expected to come under fire for being unprepared to detect electronic problems.

Toyota has recalled roughly 8.5 million vehicles in recent weeks -- including 2010 hybrid Prius models for brake issues -- and temporarily stopped U.S. sales and production until the problems are fixed.

Rep. Henry A. Waxman, California Democrat, who is chairman of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce, and Mr. Stupak wrote Monday to Mr. Lentz and Mr. LaHood, saying preliminary review of the documents provided by Toyota raises three concerns: Documents appear to show that Toyota consistently dismissed the possibility that electronic failures could be responsible for incidents of sudden unintended acceleration. The one report that Toyota has produced that purports to test and analyze potential electronic causes of sudden unintended acceleration was initiated just two months ago and appears to have serious flaws. And Toyota's public statements about the adequacy of its recent recalls appear to be misleading.

Federal prosecutors and the Securities and Exchange Commission are also investigating Toyota's safety problems and what it told government investigators.