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Tire study narrows *Bridgestone/Firestone looking at design, origin*

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After reviewing 2,000 of the 14.4 million tires it recalled in August, Bridgestone/Firestone said it is focusing its attention on the design of the recalled tires and the manufacturing process at its plant in Decatur, Ill.

The company reiterated its position that tire pressure and the vehicle on which the tires were mounted played into what has become the biggest product liability case in automotive history.

In a summary released Monday, Bridgestone/Firestone, the Nashville, Tenn.-based tire-making unit of Japan-based Bridgestone Corp. said it has "surpassed the 4.8 million mark in its safety recall of 6.5 million tires" believed still in use among the 14.4 million recalled.

The recall included all P235/75R15 Radial ATX and Radial ATX II tires and those Wilderness AT tires produced at the company's Decatur plant. The tires were original equipment on Ford's popular Explorer sport-utility vehicle.

The recalled tires are among 48 million Firestone tires under investigation by the federal government. There have been 119 deaths linked to Firestone tires. The vast majority of the deaths occurred when a Ford Explorer flipped over after a Firestone tire lost its tread.

Firestone said it has conducted stress tests on about 2,000 damaged tires. Though no final cause has been specified, Bridgestone/Firestone officials summarized

the following:

- There is a clear difference between ATX and Wilderness AT tires in terms of numbers of claims, so Firestone is focusing on tire design.

- Both ATX and AT Tires had higher claims incidents for tires made in the company's Decatur plant, so Firestone is studying what, if any, difference there was in the manufacturing there.

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- Heat and stress affect tire performance.

- The vast majority of claims involved a rear tire, and the clear majority of those were the left rear.

"We're looking at tires produced from 1991 through the spring of 2000," said Greer Tidwell, director of manufacturing operations for Bridgestone/Firestone. "But our investigation looks to be focused on tires made in 1996."

Bridgestone/Firestone said its Decatur facility has produced 2.5 million of the ATX

tires, while the plant in Wilson, N.C., has produced 3.5 million. The plants in Joliette, Quebec, and La Vergne, Tenn., have produced 4.5 million and 500,000 of the ATX tires, respectively.

The company reiterated its position that key factors include tire pressure and the vehicle on which the tires were mounted.

on ATX tires from the other two plants.

Although the Wilderness AT tires had an overall lower percentage of tread-separation claims, there were significantly more claims filed on AT tires made in Decatur than in any other plant. According to the study, Wilderness AT claims are less than one-tenth of those for 15-inch ATX tires made in the Decatur plant.

The company's internal analysis is separate from the independent investigation being conducted by University of California professor Sanjay Govindjee, which is to be completed by the end of the year.

Bridgestone is also looking at "interbelt" material problems as another possible cause.

The company also found that low tire pressure increases the heat and stress on a tire and may add to premature tire fatigue. The company said excessive heat is likely making the Firestone tires more susceptible to failure.

Bridgestone/Firestone maintains that the problem of tread separation is a combination of factors, including the performance of the vehicles that the Firestone tires were made for.

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