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Economy

DaimlerChrysler, Michelin settle van suit on eve of trial

By Jeff Plungis / *Detroit News Washington Bureau*

WASHINGTON -- DaimlerChrysler AG and Michelin SA's North American unit settled a closely watched product liability lawsuit Tuesday, avoiding what would have been the first trial involving the safety of 15-passenger vans.

Terms of the settlements were not disclosed.

"It is reasonable compensation for everybody," said David Perry, a Corpus Christi, Texas, attorney representing the twelve families suing DaimlerChrysler, Michelin, Discount Tire, Co. and two Texas dealerships.

The settlement came on the eve of opening arguments in a trial that was expected to question the safety record of large passenger vans popular with churches, and high school and college athletic programs.

The case stems from a May 8, 2001, crash of a Dodge Ram van that killed four women from the First Assembly of God church in Burkburnett, Texas. Eight other women were injured in the crash. The van rolled over several times after a Michelin tire failed.

"This tragic accident affected many people in the Burkburnett community and reaching these agreements avoided a long, drawn-out trial for everyone," said Louann Van Der Wiele, an attorney with DaimlerChrysler.

"We've resolved it to our satisfaction," said Michelin spokeswoman Lynn Mann. "We are no longer a party to the case."

Michelin, in a statement, maintained that there had been no quality or workmanship issue with the tire that failed in the crash. The tire was nine years old when it failed, the company noted.

Michelin appeared to be gearing up for a long and arduous legal fight. Last Friday, the tiremaker asked Sparkman to close the courtroom for the portions of the trial involving trade secrets, such as warranty information or tire manufacturing processes. The motion was quickly attacked as unconstitutional by two Washington consumer groups, Public Citizen and the Center for Auto Safety.

Michelin withdrew the motion Monday.

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