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Dual wheels on vans pushed

Group: Move would improve steering, cut rollover risk

By Jeff Plungis / *Detroit News Washington Bureau*

WASHINGTON -- Stepping up pressure on Detroit's automakers, a Washington consumer group and two attorneys on Tuesday proposed installing rear dual wheels on 15-passenger vans to make them safer.

By retrofitting large vans with dual rear wheels, [Ford Motor Co.](#), [DaimlerChrysler AG](#) and [General Motors Corp.](#) would improve the vehicle's steering and handling while making them less prone to rollover crashes, said Public Citizen President Joan Claybrook and attorneys Tab Turner and Ben Hogan.

The extra rear wheels would also lessen stress on the vans' tires -- a significant issue since many rollover crashes have been preceded by a tire blowout or tread separation.

The fix would cost manufacturers about \$135 per vehicle if done as part of a large-scale recall, the group said. For van owners using replacement parts, the cost would be in the \$300-\$400 range.

Hogan said he began to examine the role dual rear wheels could play in improving the safety of large vans when he found reference to them in company documents. All three van manufacturers offer dual rear wheels on some heavy-duty pickup trucks.

"The dual rear wheel fix is not something that has been invented by plaintiffs' attorneys or safety advocates," Hogan said.

To bolster their case, Claybrook, Turner and Hogan released videos of crash tests the attorneys commissioned as part of lawsuits against Ford and GM.

In one test, conducted on a 1992 GM Rally STX Van in late 2000, a van with standard wheels tipped on its side while steering through a serpentine course. When outfitted with dual rear wheels, the van stayed on the ground.

In a separate test on a modified Ford E-350 van in Arizona in late 2000, dual wheels helped correct a tendency for vehicle "oversteer."

Ford spokeswoman Carolyn Brown said the company would evaluate the proposed fix, but the company stood behind the safety record of the Econoline van.

"Where it makes sense, where it gives you a real-world payoff, we would make the necessary changes," Brown said.

DaimlerChrysler spokeswoman Ann Smith said the Dodge vans that had been a target in lawsuits had performed well in company road tests, including a slalom, a "j-turn," and a double-lane change.

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