



▶ Latest Autos Insider reports

▶ Previous Story ▶ Next Story

SEARCH detnews.com

Sunday, March 14, 2004

detnews
 SITE INDEX

- Homepage
- Search
- CyberSurveys
- Horoscope
- Lottery
- Michigan's Best
- Weather
- Staff

FORUMS

- News Talk
- Autos Talk
- Big 10 Talk
- High Schools
- Lions Talk
- Pistons Talk
- Wings Talk
- Tech Talk
- Tiger Talk
- Weight-loss

NEWS

- Autos
- ▶ Insider
- ▶ Auto Show
- ▶ Drive
- ▶ Joyrides
- Business
- ▶ Careers
- ▶ Money & Life
- Census
- Columnists
- Commuting
- Detroit History
- Editorials
- Metro / State
- ▶ Livingston
- ▶ Macomb
- ▶ Oakland
- ▶ Wayne
- Nation / World
- Obituaries
- ▶ Death Notices
- Politics / Govt.
- Real Estate
- Religion
- Schools
- Special Reports
- Technology

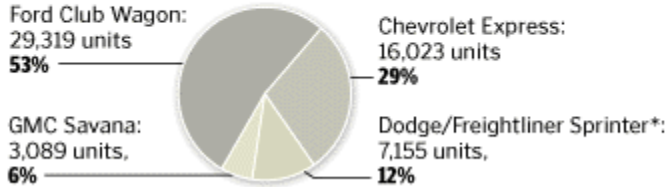
SPORTS

- Sports Insider
- ▶ Lions/NFL
- ▶ Red Wings/NHL
- ▶ Pistons/NBA
- ▶ Shock/WNBA
- ▶ Tigers/Baseball
- ▶ MSU

A look at the passenger van market

Ford dominates the market for large, 15-passenger vans and hopes to enhance sales by offering electronic stability control, a feature designed to make them less prone to roll over.

2003 large passenger van sales, share:



Sources: Ward's, manufacturers

The Detroit News

Ford to make big vans safer

Feds push automaker to equip 15-passenger models with stability system, starting in 2006

By Eric Mayne / The Detroit News

DEARBORN — Ford Motor Co., bowing to pressure from federal regulators and safety advocates, will begin equipping its 15-passenger vans with electronic anti-rollover technology in time for the 2006 model year.

The decision, which Ford confirmed Friday to The Detroit News, could help deflect criticism of 15-passenger vans industrywide, which are prone to roll over and have been linked to more than 700 deaths in the past 20 years.

Ford dominates the large van segment with its E350, Econoline and Club Wagon models. General Motors Corp. is introducing stability control on its 2004 full-size vans — the Chevrolet Express and GMC Savanna.

Large, 15-passenger vans — popular with church groups and schools for their seating capacity and price — are more prone to roll over when fully loaded and traveling at high speeds, federal statistics show.

They have become the target of federal safety regulators and numerous product liability lawsuits. In response, some insurance companies have stopped writing policies on such vehicles.

In November 2002, the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) first recommended automakers explore and install electronic stability control devices on the vans to improve handling during abrupt maneuvers.

And last July, federal safety investigators urged 15-passenger vans be equipped with additional safety belts and stronger roofs to prevent injuries during accidents, especially rollovers.

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- Browse the Classifieds
- New & Used Cars
- Employment
- Homes or Apartments
- Shop Online

Home Delivery Center

- Start home delivery
- Renew subscription
- Customer service

Autos Insider

- Autos Insider index for Sunday, March 14, 2004
- Ford to make big vans safer
- GM halts sales of some '04 models
- Honda, Toyota take to the skies
- GM recalling Oldsmobile Aurora because fuel leak can cause fire
- Hassan to retire as Nissan senior vice president
- Ford, DaimlerChrysler revive 401(k) perk
- GM: Health costs crushing
- Automakers still hot on horsepower
- Drag racing drove driver into engine production
- BMW yearly profits fall 3.6 percent
- GM health care bill tops \$60 billion
- Chrysler adds jobs to build new vehicles
- Women engineers steer clear of Big 3
- Ford recalls 1.3 million vehicles
- BMW's profit slips in 2003
- GM Daewoo to invest \$1.49B in production
- Chrysler to revive Charger
- Device smooths gear changes but silences engine's vroom
- Ford recalling more than 1.2 million Taurus, Sable sedans

- U-M
- More Colleges
- Golf Guide
- High Schools
- Motor Sports
- Outdoors
- More Sports
- Scoreboards

ENTERTAINMENT

- Entertainment
- Casino Guide
- Movie Finder
- Restaurants
- TV Listings
- Crossword

GREAT LAKES ESCAPES

- Home
- Destinations
- Hunt & Fish
- On the Water
- Recreation

HOMESTYLE

- Homestyle home
- Decorating
- Eats & Drinks
- Recipe Box
- Gardening
- Health
- Home Improvement
- Home Life
- Home Tech
- Wine Report

PHOTOS

- Photo of the Day
- Sports
- Red Wings
- Lions
- Autos
- Auto Shows
- Joyrides
- News
- History

Investigators also called for better training and licensing for drivers, who are often ill-equipped to handle the vehicles when fully loaded during an emergency or sharp maneuver.

The NTSB made the findings following a two-year investigation into high-profile van crashes in Texas and North Carolina.

Ford is equipping the 2006 model vans with electronic stability control, which gently deploys brakes and reduces engine speed when sensors detect unusual side-to-side movement. Ford's system — which debuted on the 2003 Volvo XC90 SUV and is being introduced throughout Ford's SUV lineup — is also triggered when the vehicle is suddenly subject to excessive body lean or tilt.

"It's the next layer of functionality," said Todd Brown, brake control systems manager for Ford North America engineering.

Even without the new safety feature, Ford maintains the E-Series van, also known as Econoline, is safe and reliable.

"We remain confident that this is a very safe vehicle," the automaker said in a prepared statement.

Company spokeswoman Kathleen Vokes said details that have emerged from lawsuits involving Ford's full-size vans show the vehicles were subject to driving conditions no driver and vehicle could navigate safely.

Confidential settlement

Last month, Ford reached a confidential settlement in a case involving three young American missionaries who were killed in Mexico in 2002. Ford blamed tire failure for sending the victim's E-350 Econoline van into a shallow ravine.

The plaintiffs disagreed, suggesting a design flaw was at fault.

"Ford took the position in our case that electronic stability control wasn't needed," said the victim's lawyer, Jeff Wigington of Corpus Christi, Texas. "So, I find it very interesting that they now decided to incorporate (stability control) in their 2006 vehicles."

Citing data from federal regulators, Wigington said full-size Ford vans have been involved in more than 300 traffic deaths over the last two decades. Fatalities linked to full-size vans from all manufacturers during the same period totaled 763, Wigington said.

Ford dominates the large passenger van market, with more than 50 percent of sales.

In its statement, Ford cited government statistics that show 80 percent of people killed in single-vehicle rollovers were not wearing safety belts. It also maintains that all vehicles have handling limitations.

"It is important to remember that the 15-passenger van is not a car and does not handle like a car," Ford said.

Move praised

Analysts praise the automaker for moving to introduce stability control. But they also point out that full-size vans require special attention — from motorists and manufacturers.

"It's a very good push forward," said David Champion, senior director of of Consumer Reports' auto test department. "We see it not as a panacea ... but it will help a considerable amount."

Rollovers will still occur, Champion said, but electronic stability control "will help especially if there's an inexperienced driver driving one of these vans."

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Richard Denney, an Oklahoma-based product liability lawyer specializing in litigation involving full-size vans, says federal regulators need to give the vans more scrutiny.

“In the five or six cases I’ve been involved in, they’re more dangerous when you load them,” Denney said. “Then you’ve got an exaggerated handling problem, an exaggerated stability problem, and probably an uneducated driver.”

NHTSA has issued two consumer warnings about the safe operation of 15-passenger vans. And while federal law prohibits sales of new vans for the purpose of transporting school children, insurance companies are shying away from policies involving the vehicles.

When heavily loaded, Denney noted, a significant amount of the van’s weight rides high above the van floor while being positioned toward the back. Under such conditions and at high speeds, an abrupt maneuver can cause the rear of the vehicle to swing out more easily, Champion said.

Other automakers are introducing new vans with engineering changes to avoid such problems, such as the Sprinter, a European van recently introduced by [DaimlerChrysler AG](#)’s Dodge and Freightliner brands.

“It has a lower center of gravity and it’s lighter on top and heavier on the bottom,” Denney said. “It’s got a lot of things to help eliminate problems that have happened with other models.”

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[▶ Previous Story](#) [▶ Next Story](#)