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GM trucks, SUVs prone to losing power steering

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Several popular models of General Motors trucks and SUVs are liable to lose their power steering as drivers make slow turns in parking lots, according to testimony and company documents.

The problem has forced the nation's biggest automaker to settle lawsuits and led one state police force to briefly label the condition a hazard, but GM considers it a "normal characteristic" of the vehicles.

Some drivers complain they must struggle to parallel park and navigate into tight spots. Others say they end up occupying two parking spaces because of difficulty turning the wheel. They say they were never told about the condition before buying the vehicles.

General Motors Corp. has told its technicians the problem occurs when customers apply the brakes and turn the wheel at the same time, which easily can happen as drivers try to park.

"It's a natural condition with ... medium-duty to heavy-duty vehicles, it's been a condition since Day One that they were ever built," GM employee Ronald Klemme said in a deposition. "I'm very knowledgeable of (the) condition. I don't acknowledge, I guess, that there's a problem there."

In November, however, a Wisconsin jury awarded \$120,000 to a plumber who was often unable to steer his GMC pickup truck and was denied a refund or new vehicle after he complained. GM must pay an additional \$259,000 in attorney's fees by Tuesday.

Vince Megna, a Waukesha, Wis., lawyer who represented the driver, said the case exposed "unbelievable mismanagement" by GM at a time when it is receiving \$13.4 billion in government loans and has said it might need more. Besides manufacturing vehicles with the condition for years, he accused the Detroit automaker of acting unethically by not disclosing it to customers.

"You can't tell people they're getting the greatest car manufactured on the face of the earth and then three months later admit it doesn't steer right," said Megna, who is looking into the possibility of a class-action lawsuit.

GM spokeswoman Geri Lama said the automaker would continue to treat the condition as normal and try to resolve customer complaints on a case-by-case basis.

An internal company bulletin shows that the Chevrolet Avalanche, Tahoe, Suburban and Silverado Classic; GMC Sierra Classic and Yukon; Cadillac Escalade; and Hummer H2 are at risk for the steering lock-ups. The problems affect various model years dating back to 1999.

GM's bulletin says the condition, which stems from a lack of pressure in the power steering system, can be aggravated by worn tires, low tire pressure and tires larger than stock size. For nondiesel engines, GM has told dealers that adding a pressure valve may help fix the problem. Vehicles that run on diesel engines cannot be fixed.

It's impossible to know how many vehicles with the condition are on the road, but Megna, who specializes in representing drivers with defective vehicles, said owners of the affected models have the problem to varying degrees, and most are either putting up with it or trading in their vehicles.

GM acknowledges that customers routinely complain about the issue, and one chat forum on the automotive Web site Edmunds.com is dedicated to complaints about it. Attempts to reach other customers for comment were unsuccessful, and Megna said he wasn't aware of any other lawsuits over the issue.

GM officials have testified the condition exists in other companies' vehicles, but GM never offered details in court, and Lama said she had no details on the other vehicles either.

The loss of power steering happens most often at low speeds, and GM denies the condition raises safety concerns. Rae Tyson, a spokesman for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, which can order auto recalls, said the agency has never investigated the condition. At first blush, Tyson said it may be more of a customer satisfaction issue.

"We don't see anything at this point that would elevate it to the concern of the NHTSA," he said.

The Utah Highway Patrol warned its safety inspectors in 2007 to look for the condition and reject vehicles that have it. Sgt. Joe Vasquez, the patrol's safety inspection program manager, said the patrol issued the warning after investigating a 2006 GMC Sierra Dura Max Diesel with the problem.

"We felt it was a safety hazard," said Sgt. Joe Vasquez, the patrol's safety inspection program manager.

The patrol revised its guidance last year after learning from the company the issue was normal.

"If it meets manufacturer specifications, there's nothing we can do. They are the ones certifying the vehicles," he said. "We're not engineers."

Todd Van Natta, the 46-year-old plumber from Minocqua, Wis., who won at a trial in November, has fought GM over the problem since 2005, when he purchased a new Chevrolet Silverado pickup.

He often found himself having trouble maneuvering in grocery store parking lots or when he drove to plumbing jobs at people's homes. His wife didn't have the strength to steer the truck. After four failed repair attempts, Chevrolet advised him the problem was normal and could not be fixed.

Van Natta hired Megna to pursue a refund or a new truck. An arbitrator ruled in his favor.

"This arbitrator cannot find any basis upon which a defect, simply because it exists and is apparently unable to be fixed, transforms from a defect to an apparently normal 'characteristic of the vehicle,'" wrote Henry E. Koltz. "This defect significantly impacts the vehicle's use, value, and safety."

In a settlement, GM paid \$71,500 in damages and attorneys fees and Van Natta agreed to give up the truck he bought for \$49,500.

Van Natta said he decided to purchase a 2007 GMC Sierra Classic for \$45,000 after he was assured by a salesman that the steering problem had been fixed. He said the vehicle performed well for the first 12,000 miles but then started having the same problems.

He returned to the dealer for repair four times, but company representatives told him it was a normal condition. He filed a lawsuit in 2007.

This time, GM declined to settle the case, and during a four-day trial its lawyers painted Van Natta as an impossible-to-please customer who was trying to make a buck.

It took jurors one hour to rule the steering problem was a "nonconformity" and order the company to pay damages.

Despite winning his lawsuit Van Natta said he remains angry. He said he spent a lot of time away from home and his job pursuing the case in a courtroom several hours away.

"What made me bitter was listening to those people make me out to be the bad guy when they have a product they know is bad from the beginning. What did I do? All I did was purchase the truck," he said. "I think it's just absolutely ridiculous the amount of money they wasted."

Yet even after his troubles, Van Natta bought another GM vehicle. He said he now drives a 2008 GMC Sierra, but it's a half-ton version that does not have the steering issue.