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CHRYSLER PAYS $140,000 CIVIL PENALTY FOR DODGE RAM FUEL SYSTEM FAILURE

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) today announced that Chrysler Corp. paid a $140,000 civil penalty to the United States in connection with the failure of 1994 Dodge Ram pickups to comply with a federal fuel system integrity standard.

A 1994 Dodge Ram 1500 with long wheelbase, lighter gauge frame rails and no rear bumper failed a compliance test conducted by NHTSA in accordance with Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard No. 301, "Fuel System Integrity." The failure led to the recall of 7,000 pickups.

Automakers are required to assure that all of their vehicles comply with applicable federal safety standards. While they do not have to test all possible vehicle configurations in order to ensure that all vehicles will comply, they must exercise prudent engineering judgment in selecting the "worst case" configurations for testing. In this case, the configurations tested by Chrysler during development of the 1994 Ram pickup were not in the "worst case" configuration. Moreover, the tests that Chrysler conducted during product development should have heightened Chrysler's awareness of the potential for a failure of the fuel system in a crash, NHTSA said.

In the test conducted by NHTSA, the cargo bed bent into a "V" shape and the frame rails buckled, pinching the fuel filler hose and detaching the fuel filler neck. This allowed four times as much leakage from the fuel tank as is allowed by Standard 301. Such fuel leakage greatly increases the possibility of fire in a crash, according to NHTSA.

The $140,000 paid by Chrysler was among the top five civil penalties recovered by NHTSA for a violation of a federal motor vehicle safety standard. NHTSA sought a high civil penalty amount in this case in light of the fact that this was the second time in recent years that Chrysler manufactured and sold pickups that failed to comply with the agency's fuel system integrity standard.

The prior failure involving an earlier version of the Dodge Ram pickup led to a 1990 recall of 26,600 model year 1987-1990 vehicles. In connection with that noncompliance, Chrysler paid a $35,000 civil penalty in 1991.