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Marchionne, regulators cut recall deal in private meeting

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Days after Marchionne's meeting, Chrysler agreed to inspect 1.56 million 1993-98 Jeep Grand Cherokees and 2002-07 Jeep Liberty models.

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Six days before the meeting, [NHTSA had asked](#) Chrysler to recall 2.7 million 1993-2004 Jeep Grand Cherokees and 2002-07 Jeep Libertys that the agency said had an elevated risk of catching fire in crashes. It cited the gasoline tank's location behind the rear axle and its height off the ground as possible defects.

The regulators said an estimated 51 deaths in rear-impact crashes had resulted.

Strickland told LaHood that Chrysler wasn't going to comply with the recall, and LaHood said he called Marchionne to find out whether he was involved in the decision, [The Detroit News](#) reported. LaHood suggested that the three meet.

The hour-long meeting in the Federal Aviation Administration office at O'Hare International Airport ended with an agreement among the three, and the next day, Marchionne sent a team of engineers to Washington to work with NHTSA.

“Once he (Marchionne) met with David and I in Chicago, he knew this had to get done,” LaHood told The News. “(Marchionne) didn’t realize how serious this was, how serious we were, and the thing was resolved satisfactorily. ... We pretty much reached an agreement there.”

A NHTSA spokeswoman verified that the meeting took place.

A Chrysler spokesman said today the company would not comment on the story.

On Tuesday, [Chrysler agreed](#) to inspect 1.56 million 1993-98 Jeep Grand Cherokees and 2002-07 Jeep Liberty models but will not admit the vehicles were defective. Chrysler also conceded to install a trailer hitch assembly to protect the gasoline tank if necessary.

Owners of the 1.2 million 1999-2004 Grand Cherokee models will receive a letter about getting their vehicles inspected if they have installed aftermarket rear hitches.

“The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration’s top priority is safety, including the recall of vehicles when supported by our data,” NHTSA wrote in an e-mailed statement. “As such, we are pleased that Chrysler has agreed to take action to protect its customers and the driving public.”

LaHood stood by the agency, despite criticism from Chrysler for the almost three-year investigation and NHTSA’s analysis.

“The reason we have credibility is we don’t talk from our hearts. We talk from data and we base our decisions on data, and when we started talking data with Sergio ... I think he understood what was at stake here ... We kept getting data from Chrysler, and we knew that there was a problem,” LaHood told the News.

Gabe Nelson contributed to this report.

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