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Quality panel to review Toyota

Experts to critique carmaker's operations from its electronics to communications

Christine Tierney / The Detroit News

An outside panel of high-level business and technology experts created to advise Toyota Motor Corp. will conduct a broad review of the Japanese automaker's operations ranging from its electronic systems to the company's internal communications, the head of the panel said Thursday.

"This is a very important company dealing with a very important issue," former U.S. Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater told The Detroit News.

Toyota asked Slater last month to form a panel to provide independent advice to the Slater said the seven-member panel includes leading business, aviation, safety and technology experts such as Norman Augustine, former CEO of Lockheed Martin, who served for 16 years on the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, and Patricia Goldman, former vice chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board.

Several panel members have experience of high-profile investigations, such as Sheila Widnall, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who served on the Columbia space shuttle accident investigation board.

Slater, as Transportation Secretary for President Bill Clinton, was involved in the probe of rollovers of Ford SUVs equipped with Firestone tires.

"What you have here is a rich diversity of talent and commitment," Slater said. He also recruited business experts such as **Roger Martin**, dean of the University of Toronto's **Rotman School of Management**.

"At the end of the day, we have management questions here," Slater said about Toyota's problems, notably "about the flow of communications."

Toyota's highest-ranking U.S.-based executive Yoshimi Inaba announced the formation of the panel last month during a Senate Commerce Committee hearing on the automaker's handling of safety complaints and recalls.

Since November, Toyota has recalled more than 6.5 million Toyota and Lexus cars and trucks in the United States -- and more than 9 million worldwide.

The company was fined a record \$16.4 million by the Transportation Department for failing to report safety defects in time -- a charge that Toyota denies.

Most of its recalls address complaints of unintended acceleration, but Toyota also is dealing with braking issues, rusting parts and other problems in what has become its biggest crisis in decades.

The panel's first task will be to develop a deep understanding of Toyota's safety and quality-control processes. Some panel members already have visited U.S. facilities, including the big Georgetown plant in Kentucky.

The panel will travel to Japan next month to meet with President Akio Toyoda and other top executives.

Slater said he had received assurances from Toyoda that the panel would have the resources to fulfill its mandate, free rein to offer advice and "and that we could call it as we saw it." It will be able to commission outside reviews, as well.

One of its first tasks will be to evaluate Toyota's electronic throttle control system. In this system, introduced about 10 years ago and widely used by other automakers, the driver sends an electronic signal to the throttle by stepping on the gas pedal.

Toyota has attributed reports of unintended acceleration in its vehicles to pedal entrapment by loose mats or other materials, or to gas pedals with a faulty component that may cause them to stick.

Auto experts say driver error is the most common cause of unintended acceleration in all vehicles. But some experts suspect there may be a problem with Toyota's electronics.

Toyota recently hired a Palo Alto, Calif. firm, Exponent, to test its electronic throttle control system.

The panel will meet next week with Exponent executives and engineers, and see if more work needs to be done, Slater said.

Also on the panel are Mary Good, dean of engineering and information technology at the University of Arkansas and former president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and Brian O'Neill, former president of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety

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