

DECEMBER 19, 2008, 4:25 PM

Recalls of Chinese Auto Parts Are a Mounting Concern

By CHRISTOPHER JENSEN

Flaws in auto parts produced in China are raising concerns among safety advocates. Above, a transmission parts producer in Nanchang. (Adrian Bradshaw/European Pressphoto Agency)

Child restraints that may come apart in an impact. Fuses that could catch fire when overloaded. Tires susceptible to tread separation.

Those are some of the dangers American consumers face as Chinese manufacturers increase the number of automotive parts they are sending to the United States, according to consumer and safety advocates. They parallel problems with some other products from China ranging from medicine to pet food to children's toys.

The complexity of today's cars creates many possibilities for problems with imported parts: tire valves that break and let air escape; replacement window glass that does not meet the standards for tempered glass; high-intensity discharge headlight conversions that don't meet federal standards.

There are so many automotive products coming in from China that American safety officials can't keep track of them, said Clarence Ditlow, executive director of the Center for Auto Safety.

Mr. Ditlow has been researching recalls of Chinese auto parts in the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's records. Those recalls are now posted on the safety center's [Web site](#).

Mr. Ditlow said his review convinces him that too many Chinese companies are unfamiliar with — or don't care about — safety standards in the United States and thus don't meet them.

For consumers, that means automotive equipment made in China is less likely to comply with safety standards than the same product made in the United States, Mr. Ditlow said.

"The companies in North America know that process," he said.

Sean Kane is the director of Safety Research & Strategies, a consulting firm. He worried that consumers think there is more government oversight of automotive equipment coming from China than actually exists.

Dan Smith, associate administrator for enforcement at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, says one factor causing these problems is the speed at which China has industrialized.

"It is kind of like their Industrial Revolution happened in a quarter of the time ours did," he said. "Therefore I think quality control measures need to be emphasized to the extreme in their products."

Mr. Smith said some Chinese manufacturers clearly want to comply with federal safety regulations. They just need to understand what is required.

The issue becomes more complicated because Chinese companies in China are eagerly looking for distributors.

Sometimes those can be very small companies, Mr. Kane said. "Anybody can be an importer."

One recall found by Mr. Ditlow involved kits that would make it possible for regular headlights to be converted to the more powerful high-intensity discharge lights. The seller told the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration he sold them on eBay (or with the help of friends) and kept his inventory in a closet.

The problem is that under federal law the importer is responsible for making sure the product is safe. But first-time importers may not know about safety regulations, which include the requirement to promptly report problems to the government.

“Your safety hinges on the importer,” Mr. Kane said.

In addition, small companies may not have the money to handle a recall if a product is defective. “It is a challenge frankly in terms of some of the smaller-scale importers,” Mr. Smith said.

That was an issue for Foreign Tire Sales of Union, N.J., which describes itself as a small, family-owned business with about a dozen full-time employees.

In 2007 the tire importer notified the safety agency that Hangzhou Zhongce Rubber Company Ltd. had changed the construction of some light-truck tires, which the importer contended would increase the chances of a tread separation and tire failure.

Foreign Tire Sales also told the safety administration that it lacked the money to recall defective tires — that such a recall would force it to file for bankruptcy. The agency replied that a lack of funds was not an excuse. The importer found the money and last year [recalled about 255,000 tires](#). Lawrence Lavigne, a lawyer for the importer, said that fewer tires than expected were involved, and that the recall turned out to cost far less.

That case prompted Senator Sherrod Brown of Ohio to introduce a bill last year that would require importers to have some kind of insurance to guarantee there is enough money to cover a recall. He said the United States can’t regulate the safety of products — whether automotive or pharmaceutical — produced in China, concluding that, “The solution is to make the importer responsible.”

The tire case also demonstrates the trouble a small importer can have getting a manufacturer to make safety improvements.

Court and safety agency records show that the tire importer had been complaining to Hangzhou Zhongce since at least 2005 about structural changes to various tires that made the tire more likely to fail, but got little response. In one e-mail the importer complained to the tiremaker that it was showing “a pattern for disregard to specs, mostly for cost reasons or standardization for their factory and ease of manufacture without testing to support said changes and without consulting us.”

“Their engineers did not believe there was any issue or problem,” Mr. Lavigne said.

Flawed tires made by Hangzhou Zhongce are suspected in two crashes that occurred at least a year after the tiremaker was asked to make improvements. In 2006 an ambulance in New Mexico went out of control but there were no serious injuries. Later that year two men in Pennsylvania were killed when their vehicle went out of control.

Had the tires been recalled more quickly the accident would have been avoided, said Jeffrey Killino, a lawyer who filed a suit last year against the importer and tiremaker in the Court of Common Pleas in Philadelphia County, Pa.

Mr. Lavigne said the tires were not the cause of the accident.

Mr. Ditlow and Mr. Kane say these recalls show there needs to be far tighter controls over goods coming from China.

Mr. Smith says that federal regulators are working with the Chinese government and manufacturers to make sure imports are safe.

But Mr. Kane says that’s a huge job. “Anybody, no matter how good they are going to be facing some just enormous challenges in how to deal with this,” he said. “It is such a wide-open area and there are so many products coming in.”

