

OLDER JEEP GRAND CHEROKEES MAY BE FIRE-PRONE

By Greg Webb



The Center for Auto Safety has sent a petition to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), calling for the recall of over three million Jeep Grand Cherokees, claiming that the vehicles have a design flaw in their gas tanks that makes them potential fire hazards. The petition states that "the plastic fuel tank on 1993-2004 models is not adequately protected from a rear impact because it is behind the rear axle." In addition, the plastic gas-tank can be easily punctured in a crash by a bolt from the rear sway bar, which the Motor Vehicle Fire Research Institute of Charlottesville, Virginia found to be little more than a tenth of an inch away.

Grand Cherokees made from 1993 to 2004 have "a fatal crash-fire occurrence rate that is about four times higher than S.U.V.s made by other companies," the letter states. The executive director of the Center for Auto Safety, Clarence Ditlow, told the agency, "his search of its Fatality Analysis Reporting System found 172 fatal fire crashes resulting in 254 deaths between 1992, when the Grand Cherokee was introduced, and 2008," the *New York Times* reported. Those numbers included 44 crashes that resulted in 64 deaths, with investigators deeming fire as the "most harmful event."

When Jeep introduced the 2005 Grand Cherokee model, they positioned the fuel tank in front of the rear axle. This redesign has been carried over through each successive model, and the number of fires and fire related deaths have dramatically decreased in accidents involving Grand Cherokees made in those years. The petition notes that since the redesign, there has been only one fatal fire crash, and that fire occurred only after both persons had been ejected from the vehicle. The petition issued by the Center for Auto Safety cites investigations done on the 1971-1976 Ford Pintos related to fire-hazardous fuel tanks on the basis of much fewer crashes.

Chrysler's only response to the *New York Times* was that "the Grand Cherokees provided safe transportation and that it met or exceeded federal safety standards," and that it was "irresponsible and misleading to attack the Grand Cherokee based on information from the federal analysis reporting system," calling the results in those reports "raw accident data."

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