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November 9, 2012

The Honorable David L. Strickland
Administrator
National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
West Building
Washington, DC 20590

RE: Comments on Tire Identification Number in Recalls; Docket 2012-0068

Dear Administrator Strickland:

We are pleased that the agency has proposed to make vehicle recalls more accessible to consumers, in accordance with MAP-21, the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act. Allowing the public to look up a specific vehicle by a unique identifier to determine if it was subject to a recall and the status of the remedy is a big step forward in promoting safety.

We were disappointed, however, to note that no such provision was available to consumers, or tire professionals trying to determine if a specific tire was subject to a recall. We urge the agency to consider adding a Tire Identification Number (TIN) search function to its public Web portal and require tire makers, as well as automakers to maintain the recall remedy status by TIN, as improvements to the recall notification regulations are established.

In 2009, the agency closed an important loophole in the tire recall system when it published a Final Rule requiring manufacturers to submit unique Tire Identification Numbers or ranges of TINs as part of their 49 CFR Part 573 Defect and Non-Compliance Reporting obligations. Nonetheless, the problem of accessibility for this critical information remains.

Manufacturers and large retailers do not have a database for checking recalls at the service level. The only public repository of tire recall information is located on the NHTSA website. It requires users to enter the tire's make and model to determine whether it has been recalled, then retrieve the documents associated with the recall. This process is time-consuming and challenging for the uninitiated and is completely

impractical in the time-sensitive service business. Adding a TIN-searchable system will give workers in the tire-service business, as well as consumers a tool to determine a tire's recall status.

It may also improve the tire recall repair rate, which historically has been low and routinely much lower than recalls involving vehicles, equipment or child restraints. The 10-year historical average recall completion rate for tires is about 30 percent, although the rate varies widely between campaigns, depending on a variety of factors, such as media coverage, the size of the recall population and whether the tire is a replacement or original equipment tires.

Our research has alerted us to dozens of tragic and preventable crashes caused by recalled tires which were sold in the used tire market, or as OEM equipment to second owners, or rotated into service by tire technicians that have no quick and easy way to determine if a tire has been recalled. Carolyn Thorne of Montgomery, Alabama, and Michael Enriquez of Deltona, Florida are two examples. Both were paralyzed after rollover crashes caused by recalled tires.

In December 2004, the Enriquez family purchased a 1993 Explorer from a local used car dealer. Six months later, Michael Enriquez was traveling eastbound on SR400 in Sanford, Florida, when the right rear tire of his Explorer – a recalled Firestone ATX – experienced a tread separation. The vehicle became uncontrollable and traveled through a grassy median, overturned in the westbound lanes of SR400 and was struck by an oncoming vehicle. The driver of the oncoming vehicle in the westbound lanes of SR400 was also catastrophically injured and later expired as a result of his injuries.

An investigation into the Enriquez crash revealed that the failed tire appeared to have been the original equipment spare that was left on the vehicle – despite having been inspected several times by automotive service technicians after the recall, including some at Sears Automotive Center. Just months before the Enriquez family purchased the vehicle the spare Firestone tire was rotated into service on the vehicle – likely because it looked new and retained good tread depth.

Thorne suffered a permanent spinal injury after an April 24, 2004 tread-separation rollover crash. The de-treaded tire was a Continental Grabber AW P275/60R17, recalled by the manufacturer in August 2002, because the tires had a lower-than-specified rubber gauge between the belt edges. By the time Continental announced the recall, Thorne had already experienced a low-speed tread separation, and had all four tires replaced. But the Expedition, like the Explorer, came with a full-sized spare. A tire technician rotated the spare onto the vehicle along with three new Continental P265/70R16 tires. The fourth new tire was placed in the spare well, under the vehicle.

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Thorne had her local Ford dealership check the tires to ensure that none had been recalled. She had also had purchased a lifetime tire maintenance service with Wal-Mart so that her tires would be regularly inspected, balanced and rotated. Between 2002 and 2004, Wal-Mart auto technicians serviced her tires nine times. Not one technician noticed the recalled tire on her vehicle.

We urge the agency to take the opportunity, as it re-vamps the web portal to comply with MAP-21 to improve the accessibility for tire recalls, by adding a TIN-search function.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Sean E. Kane". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Sean" being the most prominent part.

Sean E. Kane
President, Safety Research & Strategies