

Fire-protection measure still absent from airlines

WASHINGTON (AP) - Efforts to protect airline passengers from rapidly spreading post-crash fires, such as the one that swept through the Delta Air Lines jet in Texas, remain stalled after more than a decade of frustrating research.

Four years ago, the Federal Aviation Administration was on the verge of requiring airliners to use a special fuel additive that its supporters said would stop aircraft fuel vapors from igniting in a crash.

Although the anti-misting additive suppressed the spread of flames in repeated static tests, a highly publicized test using a remote-controlled Boeing 720 in the California desert failed miserably in November 1984, as the deliberately crashed jet was engulfed in a ball of flames.

The failed test came only weeks before a regulation requiring the additive was to have been announced, although the airlines had argued the additive's value was questionable and there were indications it could interfere with engine performance.

Eleven months later, after the government and chemical industry spent millions of dollars on the re-

search, the FAA abandoned the fuel additive idea because the agency said "the concept is not practical for day-to-day airline operation in the foreseeable future."

According to government figures, about 40 percent of the fatalities in potentially survivable airline crashes are caused by flames or the inhalation of toxic smoke.

Most of the 13 people killed in the crash Wednesday of Delta Flight 1141 as it was taking off from the Dallas-Fort Worth airport were believed to have died from the flames and smoke, according to investigators. It is believed that many more might have perished if the plane had not ripped apart in three places, allowing passengers to more rapidly escape.

Concern about the danger of fire after crashes has been raised by aviation safety experts for years. Research into ways to reduce the threat gained momentum in 1977 after the fiery collision of two Boeing 747 jumbo jets on a fog-bound runway at Tenerife, in the Canary Islands, killed 553 people.

For six years after the Tenerife crash the FAA's focus was on developing a polymer called Avgard, which was supposed to prevent the misting of jet fuel and thereby prevent the fireball that often engulfs a jet when fuel lines are severed in a crash.

The FAA estimated at one point that as many as 135 lives a year could be saved if the polymer were used as a fuel additive by all commercial airlines. A British company, Imperial Chemical Industries, invested more than \$15 million in developing Avgard prior to the ill-fated test in the California desert in 1984.

When fuel lines are severed or fuel tanks rupture in a crash, jet fuel often turns into a mist of small droplets that can readily explode into a fireball when exposed to heat or flames. The polymer was hoped to prevent the misting.

"There hasn't been any research done by the FAA on (the anti-mist polymer) since the crash test in 1984," agency spokesman JoAnn Sloane said.

Regulators: Samurai safe despite talk

WASHINGTON (AP) — Critics of the Suzuki Samurai have failed to demonstrate the sport-utility vehicle has an excessive tendency to roll over, federal regulators said Thursday in denying a recall petition.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration did, however, begin proceedings to establish standards to protect drivers of all light-duty vehicles against unreasonable risk of rollover.

Consumers Union, the publisher of Consumer Reports magazine, called for a ban on the Samurai in June, saying the vehicle literally trips over its own feet.

More than 150,000 of the vehicles have been sold in the United States.

NHTSA rejected a petition by the Center for Auto Safety, a public-interest group often at odds with the auto industry and its regulators, asking for a safety recall of the Samurai.

"The rollover crash involvement of the Samurai appears to be within the range of most other light-utility vehicles," the agency said. "Rollovers where they have occurred often appear to have been influenced by adverse driver and environmental factors, such as high-risk driving maneuvers, drinking, low surrounding light and lack of driver familiarity (with) either the vehicle or the road."

The Samurai's rollover rate, based on a study of 1986- and 1987-model vehicles, was six per 100,000 vehicles, NHTSA said. The Ford Bronco II, by comparison, had a rollover rate of about 19 per 100,000 vehicles. The General Motors S-10 Blazer and S-15 Jimmy had a rollover rate identical to the Samurai's.

American Suzuki Motor Corp., the Japanese automaker's U.S. subsidiary, said it claimed victory in its defense of the 4-wheel-drive Suzuki Samurai.

A Suzuki official in Brea, Calif., said NHTSA's decision supports claims the Samurai is safe and should put to rest the inaccurate and misleading attacks on the vehicle. He said he was pleased the accusations about the Samurai made by consumer groups did not color NHTSA's judgement on the matter.

Congress to hear bank's new request to purchase S&L

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — First Nationwide Bank has gone to Congress in its battle to stay in the bidding for American Savings and Loan in Stockton, the nation's largest insolvent thrift with \$31 billion in assets.

First Nationwide claimed on Wednesday it has been "frozen out" of the bidding process.

For the past five months, the Federal Home Loan Bank Board has been holding negotiations with the Robert M. Bass Group of Fort Worth to take over the savings and loan that has 185 branches in California.

First Nationwide President Robert Lackovic said new reports have indicated the Bass Group is offering less for American than his bank and its parent, Ford Motor Co., had proposed in earlier bids.

"I don't mind being outbid fair and square," he said. "But it appears from the press that the nature of the (Bass) bid has changed. Why are they allowed to keep honing their bid when we weren't?"

Bus officials discuss problems of disabled

DENVER (AP) — Greyhound Bus officials have met with advocates for the handicapped here and agreed to take steps to make their buses more accessible to people in wheelchairs.

"The important thing is to have a chance to exchange ideas and discuss these issues," George Gravley, Greyhound public relations director, said.

Wade Blank, co-director of a Denver Atlantis Community, was cool in his assessment of Wednesday's meeting, but was pleased that talks have begun.

"I don't think we have anything to take back to our membership chapters that will defuse the issue," he said.

Handicapped activists in 1985 began protesting Greyhound buses' lack of accessibility to the disabled, claiming discrimination.

Lackovic said Ford asked to be readmitted into bidding but was turned down.

"Exclusive negotiations are unprecedented and should never have been granted," he said.

Lackovic said he made his feelings known to House Banking Committee Chairman Fernand St. Germain, D-R.I., and on Monday St. Germain wrote a letter to bank board chairman Danny Wall.

The San Francisco Chronicle said in Thursday's editions that it had obtained a copy of the letter that called on Wall to "maintain maximum public confidence."

"It is essential that there be no appearance of exclusion or suggestion that any alternative was overlooked," St. Germain wrote.

St. Germain said he was concerned that "the exclusive treatment accorded the Bass Group has extended over such a long period of time and appears to have prevented the FHLBB from giving serious consideration to possible alternatives."

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