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December 24, 2004

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National Highway Traffic Safety Administration  
U.S. Department of Transportation  
Washington, D.C. 20590

Re: Design Defect in Full Sized Dodge Trucks

Gentlemen:

This letter is being sent to you to put you on notice of a potentially dangerous defect on late model full-sized Dodge 4wd pickup trucks.

I purchased a 2002 Dodge Ram 1500 quad-cab in March of 2002. During the course of normal driving on paved roads, I began to notice a peculiarity with the steering and handling of the truck. It was particularly noticeable at highway speeds when encountering a rough road situation entering a turn in the roadway, either left or right. The front-end actually bounced across the roadway - a condition that might have occurred if the tires had been over-inflated. However, checking the inflation on all the tires, particularly the front, I found the psi levels exactly where the manufacturer recommended.

After I noticed the condition, I took the truck to the local Chrysler dealer, S.J. Denham, an authorized Dodge dealer and service facility. I asked them to check the steering, etc. I was told that they could find nothing wrong with the vehicle. The condition persisted and I mentioned it to the dealership every time I took my truck in for regular servicing. On one occasion, I left the truck with S.J. Denham and asked them to keep the truck as long as they needed to isolate the problem and fix it. I was called about 3 days later saying the truck was ready and they could not find anything wrong with steering or handling. They indicated that they had taken it on at least one test drive but could not replicate the condition I was complaining about.

What I've noticed is that going into a turn that has a rough and irregular surface, the front-end of the truck actually will bounce and cause the front of the truck to move either to the left or right, depending upon which way the roadway happens to turn - in other words, loss of directional control.

The final straw happened just this last summer. I was driving on a paved road about 20mph on a slight downward roadway with a very slight bend. There were 3 adults and 1 child in my truck. As I began down the slight grade, I happened to run over a rough part of the roadway, and the front of the truck actually bounced across the roadway about 2 feet. My wife screamed and I heard gasps from the other two passengers asking me what had happened. I could offer no other explanation other than it apparently is a design flaw with Dodge trucks. Fortunately, there was no opposing traffic when this happened or I would have hit them head-on. Clearly, speed was certainly not an issue in this instance. The roadway at the time of this incident was clean and dry and happened about 11 AM under clear skies.

Since then, I have tried to find a local roadway that had a condition that would cause the truck to react in the same way as I had experienced last summer so I could replicate the problem for the benefit of the local Chrysler dealer. I finally found such a condition on a roadway called South Bonnyview in Redding, CA.

*Jessica*  
1/18/05

So, one morning about 6 weeks ago, I went to the local dealer, S.J. Denham, and told the Service Manager that I had finally found a road that had the conditions that would demonstrate the problem I had been experiencing and asked him if he would take a test drive with me. He agreed to the test drive. I was driving and he was the passenger sitting in the right front seat of my truck.

As we drove to the test area, the Service Manager and I chatted about various things, and I learned, much to my chagrin, that the Service Manager had experienced the same handling problem that I was experiencing, and not only that, he said that he had had 10 to 12 other Dodge owners bring their trucks to their agency with the same complaint – all late model Dodge full sized trucks, 4wd. He acknowledged that the problem only seemed apparent in the 4wd trucks, but not in the 2wd.

The roadway that I had found to replicate the problem is on a state 4-lane divided roadway, with a transition area going from blacktop pavement to concrete. The pavement had developed some unevenness in the surface due to the amount of traffic this particular roadway carries – all westbound approaching a concrete overpass over the Sacramento River.

I was driving at about 45mph as we approached the bridge. As the truck ran over the roadway that had the unevenness, I felt the truck react as I had anticipated – the front-end of the truck predictably bouncing to the right – probably about 6 to 8 inches. I asked the Service Manager if he had noticed the truck's behavior and he said, yes he had.

During our conversation on the way to the South Bonnyview test site, we chatted about his knowledge of the handling peculiarities and he stated that to the best of his knowledge, all the late model Dodge full-sized 4wd trucks had the same problem, including his personal Dodge 3500, 4wd.

He went on to say that he had researched all Dodge's Tech Bulletins to see if there was anything in their literature that addressed this situation – either in the Tech Bulletins or as a recall for the problem but alleged that he had found nothing that dealt with this particular problem.

I told him that I was very unsatisfied with the truck's handling, but because there were no Tech Bulletins, etc., that addressed the problem, he could offer no solutions on how to fix something that insofar as Dodge was concerned was not a design defect and a safety issue. Upon returning to the dealership, the Service Manager checked the tire inflation of the front tires and found them to be correct.

After we returned to the Dealership, I asked the Service Manager for Chrysler Motors complaint hotline which he provided. Shortly after returning home that same day, I called the Dodge hotline number and registered my complaint with them about the handling of the truck and the existence of a possible design flaw that was a safety defect issue. I was put on hold while they called the dealership to verify what my complaint was and what his recommendations had been to me as a result of our test drive– (that there was nothing wrong with the truck).

When the Chrysler Hotline folks came back on the line after talking to the Service Manager, I was told that as far as Chrysler Motors was concerned, there was nothing wrong with the truck and therefore, they were not in a position to provide any corrective measures because no defect existed.

At this point, I became concerned that not only was I driving a potentially dangerous vehicle, but that others with the same type of vehicle were being put in harm's way because of a design flaw that Chrysler Motors refused to acknowledge and correct.

Therefore, I have no other alternative but to put your organization on notice of this safety defect and ask for your help in investigating this problem and hopefully forcing the Chrysler Corporation to acknowledge the condition and offer a solution to this handling problem. The incidents I've experienced while driving this truck leads me to believe that this design flaw situation poses a significant and dangerous condition that is a serious threat to the safety of the driving public.

My truck is available at any time for a demonstration ride should that need arise. Since the episode this last summer, I have learned to try and anticipate any condition in the roadway that could cause me lose directional stability. That is the only way that I have found to deal with this situation. But, even then, as I recall the experience of this last summer when I experienced loss of control at 20mph, reduced speed may not be the answer.

Please advise if you would like any documentation of my complaints to the local dealership, i.e. work-orders specifically stating my handling complaints and their findings, etc.

Thank you for your time in considering this problem, and look forward to a resolution of this dangerous design defect.

Sincerely,

Redding, CA