



U.S. Department
of Transportation
**National Highway
Traffic Safety
Administration**

1200 New Jersey Avenue SE.
Washington, DC 20590

JUL 28 2011

NVS-216 rr
Ref. No. 10151957

Chicago, IL

Dear

Thank you for your correspondence concerning your model year (MY) 2001 Ford Escort. Your correspondence was received by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA) Office of Defects Investigation.

NHTSA is the Federal agency responsible for improving safety on our Nation's highways. We are authorized to order manufacturers to recall and repair vehicles or items of motor vehicle equipment when our investigations indicate that they contain safety defects in their design, construction, or performance. We also monitor the adequacy of manufacturers' recall campaigns. In order for the agency to initiate an investigation, we look carefully at the body of consumer complaints and other available data to determine whether a defect may exist. We cannot act on isolated problems or resolve disputes between individual owners, dealers, or manufacturers.

We appreciate the report you provided. Reports from motorists are a very important source of information for us. In your letter, you state the right front air bag in your MY 2001 Ford Escort is designed such that it will deploy independent of whether the right front seat is occupied. When the right front air bag deploys, it will create a substantial amount of damage to the right side of the dashboard and could shatter the windshield. Therefore, you request auto manufacturers be required to recall all vehicles that allow the activation of air bags in unoccupied seats and that they bear the repair costs. You propose these vehicles be retrofitted with either sensors or driver-controlled switches to prevent unwarranted air bag deployment.

Clearly, air bag replacement cost and the residual damage they can cause to interior components during air bag deployment are not insignificant; however, we respectfully deny your request to require manufacturers to recall these vehicles. At the time your vehicle was manufactured in 2001, it was in compliance with the current standards for occupant protection. The passenger side air bags were designed to deploy with a force similar to the driver's side air bag. With the advancements in air bag technology NHTSA decided to require manufacturers to comply with a new standard.

NHTSA's Occupant Crash Protection Standard No. 208 requires all passenger cars and light trucks produced after September 1, 2006 to be equipped with advanced frontal air bags. Advanced frontal air bags were designed primarily to minimize the risk of an air bag-related injury or death to children and small-stature adults. In crashes where a higher-powered air bag deployment would not be necessary and/or could cause injury, such as in a low-speed crash or in a crash where the occupant is leaning out of position, the system reduces the risk of an air bag injury by either: 1) shutting off (suppressing) the frontal air bag, or 2) deploying the frontal air bag with less inflation force.

In the case of an unoccupied front passenger seat, a modern vehicle equipped with advanced air bags would not deploy the air bag in this seating position during a crash that would normally warrant deployment.

You also suggested the use of an air bag ON-OFF switch. NHTSA will authorize by letter the installation of an air bag ON-OFF switch by an authorized dealer or repair shop for vehicle owners or users who fall into one or more specific risk groups as follows:

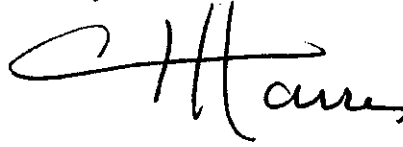
1. Individuals with medical conditions where the risks of a deploying air bag exceed the risk of impacting the steering wheel, dashboard or windshield in the absence of an air bag. *(For both driver and passenger side.)*
2. Individuals who cannot position themselves to properly operate the vehicle with breastbone at least 10 inches back from the center of the steering wheel air bag cover. *(For driver side only.)*
3. Individuals with the need to transport an infant in a rear-facing child restraint in the front seat because the vehicle has no rear seat, the rear seat is too small to accommodate a rear-facing child restraint, or because it is necessary to constantly monitor the child's medical condition. *(For passenger side only.)*
4. Individuals with the need to carry children between one year old and 12 years old in the front seat because the vehicle has no rear seat, the consumer must carry more children than can be accommodated in the rear seat, or because it is necessary to constantly monitor a child's medical condition. *(For passenger side only.)*

The benefits of air bags are well established. A statistical summary published in September 2010, by NHTSA's National Center for Statistics and Analysis, shows in vehicle crashes reported between 2005 and 2009, frontal air bags saved an estimated 13,314 lives nationally (summary enclosed). It has been proven that air bags, in conjunction with the proper use of seat belts provide significant safety benefits over not using or having them available at all.

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I hope this information is helpful, please contact Mr. Frank S. Borris, Director of the Office of Defects Investigation, at (202) 493-2631.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "CHarris".

Claude H. Harris
Acting Associate Administrator
for Enforcement

Enclosure