U.S. Department of Transportation

**National Highway Traffic Safety Administration**

# ODI RESUME

OFFICE OF DEFECTS INVESTIGATION

NHTSA

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**Investigation:** PE 15-023
**Date Opened:** 06/09/2015
**Date Closed:** 10/02/2015
**Investigator:** Nate Seymour
**Reviewer:** Bruce York-B
**Approver:** Jennifer Timian
**Subject:** 5th Wheel malfunction

## MANUFACTURER & PRODUCT INFORMATION

**Manufacturer:** Fontaine Fifth Wheel Company
**Products:** Fontaine Ultra LT 2011-2014
**Population:** 6,800

**Problem Description:** Vehicles equipped with the Fontaine Ultra LT 5th wheel may not latch securely.

## FAILURE REPORT SUMMARY

| | ODI | Manufacturer | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Complaints:** | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Crashes/Fires:** | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Injury Incidents:** | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Fatality Incidents:** | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| **Other*:** | 1 | 1 | 1** |

***Description of Other:** Equipment Manufacturer's briefing to ODI

** Total eliminates duplicates received by ODI and manufacturer.

## ACTION / SUMMARY INFORMATION

**Action:** The PE is closed. See Safety Recall 15E-066.

**Summary:**

Fontaine has submitted recall 15E-066 covering Ultra LT 5th wheel produced from July 29, 2009 to May 27, 2013. The affected 5th wheels may experience cumulative damage during coupling procedures that can cause the locking mechanism to not properly engage, which could increase the risk of a vehicle crash. This investigation is closed as the affected components have been recalled.

In its 2014 second quarter Early Warning Report (EWR), Fontaine reported one Death & Injury (D&I) crash. The crash resulted in two fatalities. The reported crash occurred on January 24, 2014, when a semi-trailer separated from a 2012 International ProStar. The separated trailer struck two oncoming vehicles killing both drivers.

After requesting and receiving additional information (including police accident reports) from Fontaine about the crash incident, ODI learned that Federal Motor Carrier Inspectors determined the 5th wheel was fully functional and the crash was most likely due to driver error where the trailer was not properly coupled to the towing vehicle prior to the crash.

Before the crash in January 2014, Fontaine had issued two Technical Service Bulletins (TSB) related to potential coupling issues with the Ultra LT 5th wheel.

On March 1, 2011 Fontaine issued Service Bulletin SB-10036732-7541 (ODI #10036732) describing a condition in which its Ultra LT 5th wheel could become partially closed during a trailer coupling process. The partial closing could allow a driver who only conducts a pull test during the process to believe the fifth wheel lock is properly coupled to the trailer king pin when in fact it is not.

Upon receipt of the March 2011 TSB ODI opened a defect investigation (PE11-012) on the subject 5th wheels. The intent of the investigation was to better understand the false latch conditions on the Ultra LT 5th. The investigation resulted in recalls from DTNA (11V289), PACCAR (11V-388), Volvo (11V-460) and Mack (11V-461). Fontaine did not issue an equipment recall.

On April 4, 2012, Fontaine issued a second Service Bulletin SB-10044108-5115 (ODI #10044108) describing another issue with the Ultra LT 5th wheel. In this case the operating lever in the fifth wheel could become bent (due to improper coupling techniques) to such a degree that the locking mechanism would not extend completely across the throat of the fifth wheel or seat fully behind the locking jaw. As a result of the bent operating lever condition, Fontaine stated that a trailer could disconnect from the towing vehicle. Fontaine later ceased production of the Ultra LT 5th wheel all together. At the time ODI received the second TSB, there were no related consumer complaints and ODI did not feel that the bent locking mechanism was the result of a design or manufacturing defect.

In April 2015 Fontaine requested a meeting with ODI and on May 13, 2015 met to discuss the D&I event and a third service campaign they were considering for the Ultra LT 5th wheels.

After meeting with Fontaine to discuss the D&I event, ODI was concerned that Fontaine's Ultra LT 5th wheels were more vulnerable to foreseeable damage during truck/trailer coupling procedures than peer fifth wheel hitches. ODI opened this investigation to gather additional information, assess the conditions described in the first two Fontaine service bulletins and conduct testing of the Ultra LT 5th wheel.

During the investigation ODI sent Fontaine an Information Request (IR) letter to gather information about the subject component as well as peer 5th wheels manufactured by Fontaine. Prior to the IR due date, Fontaine decided to conduct safety recall 15E-066. With this recall, Fontaine requested relief from answering the IR letter. Although Fontaine recalled the subject equipment, ODI required Fontaine to provided a partial IR response.

With recall action 15E-066 taken by Fontaine this investigation is closed. Ultra LT 5th wheels produced between July 29, 2009 and May 27, 2013 are included.