

Yamaha recalls off-road vehicle after 46 deaths

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Yamaha Motor Corp. USA suspended sales of its Rhino off-road vehicles Tuesday and launched a repair program after the Consumer Product Safety Commission determined that they had been involved in more than 50 accidents resulting in 46 deaths and hundreds of injuries.

About 145,000 Rhinos have been sold since the two-seat "side-by-side" vehicle, which looks like a small dune buggy, was introduced in 2003. Yamaha will make free repairs on Rhino 450, 660 and 700 models that will make them safer and less prone to rolling over, the commission said in a statement released in cooperation with Cypress-based Yamaha, the U.S. arm of the Japanese manufacturer.

The commission's acting chairwoman, Nancy Nord, said she became so concerned about the number of deaths and injuries associated with the Rhino vehicles that "I directed staff to step up their investigative efforts." Nord characterized the recall as "a critical step toward increasing family safety."

Among the repairs, Yamaha will be removing the Rhino's rear anti-sway bars and installing spacers on the rear wheels and half doors on door-less models, said Van Holmes, a Yamaha spokesman.

The CPSC is advising Rhino owners to stop using them until they have been repaired, Holmes said. Yamaha isn't scrapping the popular line, however; Rhino vehicles will return to showrooms after repairs have been made, he said.

The recall and repair program is a victory for those who've lost family or friends in Rhino accidents, said Heidi Crow, whose 9-year-old son, Jeremy Todd, known as J.T., died in a Rhino rollover accident June 22, 2007.

Crow and her husband, Jeremy, along with other families

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who have been affected by Rhino accidents, have spread the word through a website (www.jtcrow.net) and lobbied the commission to get Yamaha to make the repairs.

"This is the first time that I've felt like all the work and everything that we've been doing over the last 21 months has paid off," said Crow, who lives in Winsborough, Texas. "There's been a lot of lives lost that could have been prevented, but the changes are being made, so I'm happy."

The two-passenger Rhino has a built-in roll cage, but a narrow wheelbase and an anti-sway bar that can lift the rear tires off the ground during slow turns have caused many accidents, Crow said.

J.T. was wearing a seat belt when the Rhino he was riding in flipped over, launching him from the vehicle before it rolled on top of him, she said.

"These repairs address the Rhino's design defects," Crow said. "If we make it wider, then we make it more stable and we make it safer and we save people's lives, and that's what this is all about."

More than two-thirds of the reported accidents were roll-overs, many involving turns at low speeds and on level terrain, the commission statement said.

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