

# Firestone Tires Still Claiming Lives

## **Defective Firestone ATX and Wilderness AT spare tires remain in circulation.**

Calls for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to investigate the effectiveness of the consumer replacement programs in 2000 and 2001 have surfaced.

The Enriquez family of Deltona, Florida and the families of three other victims have requested that NHTSA work with Firestone and Ford to launch another consumer notification program to ensure that the defective spare tires are removed. Reports filed by Firestone and Ford to NHTSA indicate that approximately 12 million of the more than 20 million tires that remained in use were captured by the recalls. Spare tires were often forgotten in the initial drive to replace the four in-service tires. In subsequent years, the defective spares have been passed along in used-vehicle sales and put in service with catastrophic results.

Michael Enriquez, 27, suffered permanent injuries in May 2005, when the Firestone ATX P235/75R15 on his 1993 Ford Explorer experienced a tread separation and overturned on a Florida highway. Mr. Enriquez had only owned the vehicle for six months when the accident occurred. Enriquez, now a quadriplegic, resides in a rehabilitation facility where he is dependent upon a ventilator to breathe.

In August 2000, and again in June and October 2001, the Ford Motor Company and Bridgestone/Firestone conducted massive campaigns to retrieve some 20 million P235/75R15 ATX and 15, 16 and 17-inch Wilderness AT tires after a federal investigation determined that the tires were prone to tread separations that officially claimed more than 270 lives in rollover accidents, mostly involving Ford Explorers.

The massive shortages created by three separate replacement programs also prompted some dealerships and tire centers to focus on the four in-service tires first. Many consumers assumed that the spares were changed as well, and its location under the vehicle made it impossible for the consumer to check, without removing it. Other consumers were told they would have to wait up to a year for a spare replacement. Despite complaints to Ford, some spares were not replaced. When the original owners sold their vehicle, the forgotten spare was passed along, and, in some cases, used. In the last two years, there have been four known cases in which a defective recalled tire caused a serious accident resulting in one fatality and three victims coping with permanent injuries.

The ATXs and Wilderness tires may appear to be in perfect condition, with deep tread. Tires age and degrade over time regardless of whether they have been used.

Firestone recalled their Firestone ATX and Wilderness tires in overseas markets. Nine days later, Firestone announced its first recall in North America.

## **A Little History**

## Firestone 500 tread separation problem

Radial tires were introduced to the US market by rivals Goodrich and Michelin in the late 1960's, and Firestone lacked one. The first radial tire developed and produced by Firestone was the ill-fated Firestone 500 Radial. Manufacturing of the new tire was performed on equipment designed to manufacture bias-ply tires.

During the 1970s, Firestone experienced major problems with the Firestone 500 radial. The Firestone 500 steel-belted radials began to show signs of separation of the tread at high speeds. While the cause was never proved, it is believed that the failure of bonding cements used by Firestone to hold the tread to the tire carcass, may have allowed water to penetrate the tire which in turn may have caused the internal steel wire to corrode. In March 1978, NHTSA announced publicly a formal investigation into defects of the Firestone 500. The NHTSA investigation found that the tread separation problem was most probably a design defect affecting all Firestone 500's.



### A Firestone Radial

In 1973, only two years after the 500's debut, Thomas A. Robertson, Firestone's director of development wrote an internal memo stating "We are making an inferior quality radial tire which will subject us to belt-edge separation at high mileage".<sup>[9]</sup> Firestone introduced strict quality control measures in an attempt to fix the inherent problems, however they were not successful in totally eliminating the basic faults. In 1977 a recall of 400,000 tires produced at the problematic [Decatur](#) plant was initiated. Firestone was considered to be less than cooperative with the NHTSA during the agency's investigation into the Firestone 500. Firestone blamed the problems on the consumer, stating underinflation and poor maintenance.

On [October 20, 1978](#), Firestone recalled over 7 million Firestone 500 tires<sup>[10]</sup>, the largest tire recall to date. Congressional hearings into the 500 also took place in 1978. The tire was found to be defective and the cause of 34 deaths. Firestone was fined \$500,000 USD, which at that time was the largest fine imposed on any American corporate entity. Multiple lawsuits were settled out of court and the constant negative publicity crippled the company's sales and share price.<sup>[11]</sup>

[Harvard Business School](#) and [Wharton School](#) taught classes and wrote papers on the issues of misjudgments and poor decision making by the management of Firestone.<sup>[11][12]</sup> After years of bad publicity and millions paid out in compensation to victims, Firestone was losing vast amounts of money, and its name was severely damaged.<sup>[13][14][15][16]</sup>

## **Ford Explorer rollover problem**

*Main article: [Firestone and Ford tire controversy](#)*

In 1996, several state agencies in Arizona began having major problems with Firestone tires on Explorers. According to news reports, various agencies demanded new tires, and Firestone conducted an investigation of the complaints, tested the tires and asserted that the tires had been abused or under-inflated.

On [September 6, 2000](#), in a statement before the US Senate [Appropriations Transportation subcommittee](#) the president of the [consumer advocacy](#) group [Public Citizen](#), [Joan Claybrook](#), stated:

“ ...There are a number of parallels between this recall in 2000 and the 1978 recall of the Firestone 500....there was a documented coverup by Firestone of the 500 defect, spurred by the lack of a Firestone replacement tire. When the coverup was disclosed, the top management of the company was replaced as Firestone was severely damaged in reputation and economically. But a key difference is that the Firestone 500 was used on passenger cars, which rarely rolled over with tire failure. NHTSA documented 41 deaths with the 500, a recall, involving seven million tires.<sup>[24]</sup> ”

The report went on to indicate that Ford also had a major role in the problems stating that The Ford Motor Company had instructed Firestone to add a nylon ply to the tires it manufactured in Venezuela for additional strength and that Ford had made suspension changes to the Explorer model available in Venezuela. Ford did not specify adding the nylon ply for U.S.-made Firestone tires nor did it change the Explorer suspension on US models at this time.



Ford Explorer

An abnormally high failure rate in Firestone's Wilderness AT, Firestone ATX, and ATX II tires resulted in multiple lawsuits, as well as an eventual mandatory recall. In 2001

Bridgestone/Firestone severed its ties to Ford citing a lack of trust. The lack of trust came about concerns that Ford had not heeded warnings by Bridgestone/Firestone relating to the design of the Ford Explorer.<sup>[25]</sup> In 2006, Firestone announced renewed efforts to recall tires of the same model recalled in 2000 after the tires were linked to recent deaths and injuries. Although Firestone estimates 97% of the tires were replaced in the 2000 recall concern existed over spare tires that many owners did not think to replace during the 2000 recall.<sup>[26]</sup> Part of this effort was a new advertising campaign in an attempt to reach the 5% of customers that still had not acted on its voluntary recall program. The recall/replacement program was supported by a comprehensive advertising and consumer outreach campaign and over 6.3 million tires were replaced of the total 6.5 million affected. This still leave approx 200,000 tires out there somewhere. While the company believes that most of those tires unaccounted for have probably been scrapped long ago it is still trying to locate as many as possible.<sup>[27]</sup>

The vice president of Quality Assurance for Bridgestone Firestone North America Tire, LLC; Mike Kane, stated "Even though there are only a small percentage of these tires believed to be still in use, we are continuing to put safety first and are implementing this campaign to try and reach a group of consumers whose tires have not been recovered".<sup>[27]</sup>