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TWO CHEVROLET CRUZES have caught fire while being driven, according to complaints to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Above, the Cruze at the L.A. Auto Show in November.

Fires in Chevrolet Cruzes, Jeep Wranglers spark probe

Investigators focus on incidents involving 2011 model of small sedan and 2010 SUV.

BY JERRY HIRSCH

Federal safety regulators have launched an investigation into the cause of fires in the Chevrolet Cruze, General Motors' bestselling passenger car.

According to complaints made with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, there have been at least two incidents in which the small sedan has caught fire while being driven. GM said it is researching warranty claims involving fires for at least 19 Cruzes.

Regulators also are looking at fires in the Jeep Wrangler sport utility vehicle.

No injuries or accidents have been reported with the fire incidents in the Jeep and Chevrolet vehicles.

NHTSA launched the Cruze probe only two months after closing a similar investigation into fires that broke out following safety tests of the Chevrolet

Volt, GM's plug-in hybrid vehicle.

GM fixed the problem by adding structural reinforcement that better protects the Volt's battery pack from punctures or a coolant leak in a severe side crash.

But the issue hurt sales of the car and proved an embarrassment to GM, which is marketing the Volt as a technical achievement and a sign of the automaker's successful reemergence from bankruptcy reorganization in 2009.

Having to deal with another fire issue so soon after resolving the Volt defect could hurt Chevrolet's image, analysts said.

The fire issue might drive buyers to other brands because "there are so many other good cars in that segment and there are not legions of faithful Cruze buyers out there because it is a fairly new model for Chevrolet," said Jessica Caldwell, an analyst with auto information company Edmunds.com.

Moreover, the typical Cruze buyer is "someone who is very practical, and safety will be a concern," Caldwell said.

With sales of almost

232,000 last year, the Cruze became one of the nation's most popular small cars, outselling rivals such as the Honda Civic and Ford Focus and only narrowly trailing the Toyota Corolla.

It is selling well again this year as new-car buyers gravitate to smaller, more fuel-efficient vehicles because of high gas prices.

One incident involved a driver of a 2011 Cruze Eco — a model with a special factory-installed set of options that increases the sedan's fuel economy — with about 11,000 miles on the odometer.

The driver complained of a slight smoke smell while driving and stopped the vehicle. A flame appeared out of the hood and the car was completely engulfed within five minutes.

It was only after the first flames appeared that a warning light appeared on the dashboard.

In the other case reported to NHTSA, the driver was waiting to cross an intersection when a woman in the car in the next lane started shouting that the Cruze was on fire. The vehicle also was quickly engulfed, according to the report.

NHTSA's probe is fo-

cused on the 2011 model year Cruze.

"We are conducting our own investigation and will share any findings with the government," said Alan Adler, a GM spokesman.

The agency also has received eight reports alleging fires originating in the engine compartment of 2010 model year Jeep Wrangler vehicles. More than 100,000 Wranglers from that model year were sold.

Chrysler Group, which makes the vehicles, said it will cooperate with the investigation.

In one case reported to federal safety officials, a driver said the SUV was parked and running when someone yelled that the car was on fire.

"Once out of the Jeep, I looked under it and saw an unknown liquid burning down to the ground from the engine area," the driver wrote. "I attempted to extinguish the fire with water but I was unsuccessful. Within minutes it was a total loss."

Seven of the eight complainants allege the fire or symptoms of the impending fire began while driving.

jerry.hirsch@latimes.com