

Safety inspectors want more authority

■ Bridgestone/Firestone recall spurs NHTSA to request more power and access to data.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Transportation Secretary Rodney Slater on Tuesday urged Congress to give federal safety inspectors broad new powers because of the Firestone tire case, including access to overseas product data, manufacturer warranty claims and insurance claim information.

"We must look to the future and guard against any repetition of tragedy caused by defective vehicles or equipment," said Slater, whose agency includes the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, which has been criticized for not investigating Bridgestone/Firestone Inc. and Ford Motor Co. earlier.

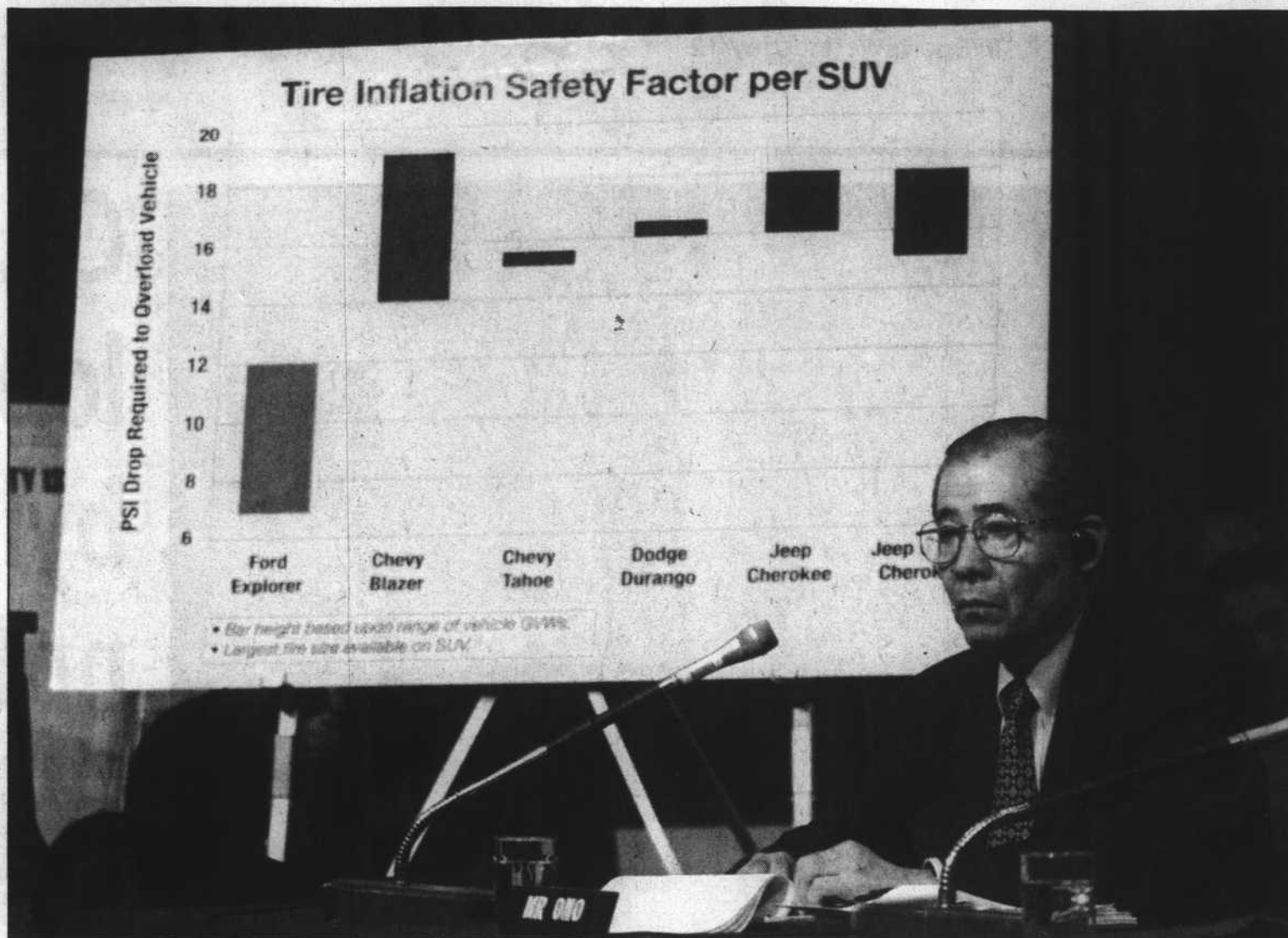
Meanwhile, in another sign of the deteriorating relationship between Ford and Firestone, Ford CEO Jac Nasser ripped Bridgestone/Firestone officials who he said withheld data from Ford indicating the tires had safety problems.

"This is not the candid and frank dialogue Ford expects in its business relationship," he told the Senate Commerce Committee.

Nasser also announced that later this year Ford customers will have the option of whether they want Firestone tires on their new Explorers. The Firestone tires have been standard equipment on the vehicles.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., called the hearing to examine the Aug. 9 recall of 6.5 million Firestone ATX, ATX II and Wilderness AT Tires, which are used on Ford trucks and SUVs.

NHTSA Administrator Sue Bailey was asked whether the problem was with Ford Explorers or Firestone tires, or a combina-



Firestone/Bridgestone Chief Executive Officer Masatoshi Ono prepares to testify Tuesday at Senate hearings in Washington, D.C. The U.S. Senate Commerce Committee was holding a hearing on the Firestone tire recall.

tion of the two. She said the investigation is continuing but that "at this time, I think we're dealing with a tire problem, but as part of our investigation we will also explain the possibility of a combination."

Ford officials repeatedly have stated the accidents that have been reported were due to a "tire problem" rather than a "vehicle

problem."

Bridgestone/Firestone officials have acknowledged problems with tires, but say the design of the Explorer could have contributed to some accidents.

NHTSA says 88 U.S. deaths may be linked to the tires. The agency has warned that an additional 1.4 million Firestone tires also are dangerous and should be

replaced.

Bridgestone/Firestone disputes that claim, but executive vice president John Lampe told the committee the company now plans to replace the tires for free or reimburse customers up to \$140 per tire for competitors' models. The company previously had said it only would replace tires if an inspection showed safety prob-

lems.

McCain said he had serious questions about when Ford and Firestone knew they had tire problems.

"The mounting evidence is making it increasingly difficult to credibly believe that neither of these companies knew anything of this problem before this summer," McCain said.

Protests in Europe call for fuel tax cut

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LONDON — Protesters and union leaders called for European governments to slash fuel taxes, vowing Tuesday to widen demonstrations that have snarled traffic, blocked refineries, led hospitals to cut back on ambulance services and prompted motorists to stock up on gasoline.

Truckers, taxi drivers, farmers, tour operators and others who claim that high oil prices are hurting their businesses protested in Britain, Belgium, the Netherlands, France and Germany.

"These guys are doing it to save their livelihoods," said Mike Salmon, of the British Road Haulage Association, representing protesting truck drivers.

Across Britain, thousands of gas stations were closed and tanker fleets were at a standstill. Some hospital patients faced

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Mike Salmon
British Road Haulage Association spokesman

delayed surgeries as ambulances were put on an emergency-only schedule.

Prime Minister Tony Blair canceled a planned trip to the north to hold emergency meetings with key ministers.

Queen Elizabeth and her senior advisers gave the government the go-ahead to employ emergency measures, but officials had not specified what those might be.

In Belgium, truckers intensified their protests by blockading gasoline depots, disrupting freeway traffic and maintaining a stranglehold on main thoroughfares in the capital, Brussels.

Truckers also slowed traffic on a freeway linking Brussels with the northern port of Antwerp. The main freeway to Luxembourg was jammed and the highway from Brussels to the French city of Lille was blocked at the border.

Negotiations between road haulage unions and the Belgian government were to resume after breaking up Monday evening.

Dutch pass bill letting gays wed

■ Lawmakers vote 109-33 for converting same-sex partnerships into marriages.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

THE HAGUE, Netherlands — The Netherlands, long among the gay rights vanguard, enacted a bill converting the country's "registered same-sex partnerships" into full-fledged marriages, complete with divorce guidelines and wider adoption rights for gays.

Proponents say the legislation will give Dutch gays rights beyond those offered in any other country.

Lawmakers thumped their desks in approval when the vote passed 109-33, and some of the scores of witnesses in the packed public gallery applauded and embraced.

Parliament had discussed the bill last week, when only a few small Christian parties voiced opposition during an emotional and often heated three-day debate.

It gained speedy approval Tuesday.

"I'm very happy. What happened today represents changes in our society," said Mark Wagenbuur, 34.

He said he and his partner, who came with him to watch the vote, will now formally wed, but their immediate problem is "we don't know who should ask whom."

In Norway and Sweden, gay couples can already register their

partnerships and Denmark has gone a step further — it was the first country to allow gay marriages in 1989. Two years ago, the Netherlands enacted a law allowing same-sex couples to register as partners and to claim pensions, social security and inheritance.

But the new Dutch legislation goes farther, creating full equality for gays, activists said.

Same-sex couples will be able to marry at city hall and adopt Dutch children. They will be able to divorce through the court system, like heterosexual couples.

Boris Dittrich, a member of the centrist Democrats 66 party and a proponent of the plan, said the law "acknowledges that a person's sex is not of importance for marriage." He spoke during what he called "the most moving debate" of his parliamentary career.

"We will be able to call it what it is and that's marriage," said Henk Krol, an activist and editor-in-chief of the Gay Krant magazine. He said the vote "will be an absolute first in the world."

The law is expected to take effect early next year. Krol said he plans to convert his own partnership status to marriage as soon as it does.

Displaying unusual solidarity, all three parliamentary factions in the governing coalition — the left-of-center Labor Party, the Liberal VVD and the smaller Democrats 66 — backed the proposal. Even a few members of the biggest opposition party, the largely traditional Christian Democratic Alliance, or

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Mark Wagenbuur
member of gay community

CDA, have expressed support.

The plan hasn't been recognized by the dominant Protestant or Roman Catholic churches, but a few breakaway churches have sent encouraging letters to legislators.

The Remonstrant Brethren, which broke from the Protestant church in 1619, was one step ahead of the Dutch parliament, having accepted gay marriages in 1986.

The Remonstrants and a group called the Old Catholic Church are the best-known supporters of gay rights here.

While gays will enjoy new liberties in the Netherlands, they may run into trouble when they travel in countries where homosexuality remains illegal. The Foreign Affairs Ministry has proposed offering legal assistance to Dutch citizens in such cases.

Some opponents fear the unique position of gays could isolate the Dutch and set the Netherlands apart.

The bill will create "a world without foundations ... where the historical understanding of marriage is torn from its roots," said Kees van der Straaij of the Reformed Political Party.

Weather

TODAY
Partly cloudy
high 90, low 64

TOMORROW
Partly cloudy
high 80, low 50

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World/Nation

The Associated Press

Japan

Floods, mudslides kill seven, injure 41

TOKYO — Rescue workers paddled rowboats past inundated buses and homes Tuesday in central Japan to pick up residents stranded by floods and mudslides that killed seven people and forced the nation's biggest car-maker to stop production.

Rainfall totaling 23 inches was recorded over the past 24-hour period, the local observatory said. The record rainfall was expected to surpass 32 inches in some areas, the Meteorological Agency said.

In addition to the dead, 41 people were injured and two were missing in the floods set off by the torrential rains, the national police said.

Authorities in the industrial city of Nagoya told more than 360,000 people to evacuate their homes, city official Tadanobu Horiguchi said. Many sought shelter on the second or third floors of schools.

South Carolina

Newborn baby survives being buried alive

FAIRFAX — When police began looking for a missing infant last week, they expected the worst.

But their search for a tiny body became a rescue mission when they pulled the hours-old newborn from a shallow grave where ants crawled on his skin and a board covered his body.

Police say Carolyn Jones early Friday buried her newborn son headfirst in a trash dump in this town about 70 miles south of Columbia. Then, they said, she left him to die.

Jones, 21, has been charged with assault and battery with intent to kill. She was held in lieu of \$40,000 bond on Monday. Her 5-pound, 11-ounce son was in good condition at a Columbia hospital.

Police allege that Jones gave birth Friday, then took the baby to the dump near this rural community of 2,500 people and buried him in a 14-inch grave. She then went to Allendale County Hospital, where doctors alerted police that the woman had signs of giving birth but had no baby.

Austria

OPEC leader warns of energy crisis

VIENNA, Austria — OPEC President Ali Rodriguez warned that the world is facing a possible energy crisis similar to that of the 1970s when high oil prices hurt demand and fueled inflation.

Rodriguez said Tuesday "it remains to be seen" whether the 800,000 barrels a day by which the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries agreed Sunday to raise its output will be enough to push prices lower. He called for joint action between producers and consumers to bring the price down.

Speaking as he departed from Vienna after this weekend's OPEC meeting, Rodriguez attributed high oil prices to taxes and "intense activity of speculation" in the oil markets.

Austria

European Union lifts diplomatic sanctions

VIENNA — European Union members lifted diplomatic sanctions against Austria on Tuesday after an investigating committee concluded the measures had stoked the very nationalistic fervor they were designed to punish.

The sanctions were imposed in February after conservative Chancellor Wolfgang Schuessel brought members of the far-right Freedom Party into his coalition government. Schuessel hailed the decision to lift the measures as "a great success for Austria."

Vice Chancellor Susanne Riess-Passer, the current leader of the Freedom Party, said a "dark chapter has ended." She added that the decision to end the sanctions affirmed that citizens of individual EU member states "have the right to determine their own government."

Announcing an end to the sanctions, the French government, which holds the European Union's rotating presidency and spearheaded the sanctions, said the measures had been useful and "they can now be lifted."

Scout charter protested

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — A small group of House lawmakers charging that the Boy Scouts' policy toward gays was a badge of intolerance moved Tuesday to repeal the organization's federal charter.

The legislation, heading for an evening vote, was another challenge to the long-standing relationship between the Boy Scouts and the federal government rising out of the group's stance on excluding homosexuals.

The bill's chief sponsor, Rep. Lynn Woolsey, D-Calif., said she was a Girl Scout and one of her sons was a Boy Scout. "We're not saying the Boy Scouts are bad; we're saying that intolerance is bad," she said in introducing the measure earlier this summer.

"We're disappointed that this

bill would even be considered," countered Boy Scouts spokesman Gregg Shields. He said having a federal charter is an honor and "we hope to continue to live up to that honor."

The Boy Scouts of America got its federal charter in 1916, six years after it was founded. It is one of about 90 groups with such designation, an honorary title given to patriotic, charitable and education organizations.

While it confers no specific benefits, receiving a federal charter is a mark of prestige and national recognition for a group.

The Supreme Court, in a 5-4 decision in June, upheld the Boy Scouts' ban on gays' serving as troop leaders. That ruling may also give legal backing to the 6.2 million-member organization's rejection of gay youths.