

# Ford, Firestone clash over blame in accidents

**■ In a government-arranged meeting in Venezuela to negotiate compensation, Firestone refused to show up.**

**THE ASSOCIATED PRESS**

**CARACAS, Venezuela**—Bridgestone/Firestone Inc. refused to attend a government-arranged meeting Wednesday with victims of accidents involving Firestone tire failures on Ford Explorers, saying it could not be blamed for the vehicles going out of control.

Ford Motor Co.'s Venezuelan subsidiary did send representatives to the meeting, and offered to set up a committee to negotiate compensation for victims. Ford said it felt "as betrayed as the Venezuelan people" by Firestone, which it said hid information about tire problems.

The meeting with some 50 victims, called by Venezuela's consumer protection agency, quickly became the latest battleground for what has become an open war between the two companies over who is to blame for at least 150 fatal crashes worldwide involving Firestone tires. In many cases the tires were on

Explorers. Ford contends tread is peeling off the Firestone tires, causing vehicles to crash. Firestone contends the Explorer is unstable and its suspension system may have contributed to tire failure, charges Ford disputes.

Although summoned by the government agency, Bridgestone/Firestone declined. To attend "would imply an admission of guilt that is not ours," according to Ana Cecilia Colmenarez, legal director for the company's subsidiary in Venezuela.

Bridgestone/Firestone "has emphatically maintained it has no responsibility" for the accidents, she told the agency's director, Samuel Ruh, in a letter.

Colmenarez said the tire company was cooperating with a government investigation into the cause of tire blowouts, allowing a prosecutor to visit a tire plant in the city of Valencia on Wednesday.

The consumer protection agency's legal adviser, Steleo Pebreanez, said Bridgestone's absence "implies they have no desire to reach a reconciliation."

He said the companies must cooperate in reaching a settlement with victims, or would face fines of up to \$11,600 for

each victim. The government wants both companies to compensate a total of 104 victims for deaths, injuries and damage to vehicles.

Japan's Bridgestone Corp., the parent of Bridgestone/Firestone, posted 18.90 billion yen, or \$172.8 million, in profits for the six months ended June 30. During the same period, Ford earned \$1.5 billion on revenue of \$87.4 billion.

Ford sent lawyers, its purchasing manager and about 50 mechanics to the meeting.

Andres Mezgradis, legal counsel for Ford of Venezuela, urged the accident victims to work with a Ford committee on quickly determining compensation, arguing lawsuits could take years to resolve.

In a prepared statement, Ford legal director Irene de Fuentes said "as a serious company," Ford believed reaching settlements "is the best way to help those affected by the problems associated with Firestone tires."

Ford also gave the government test results that "confirmed the stability and maneuverability of Ford Explorer sport utility vehicles," said Ford sales director Hector Rodriguez.

"We all know that the problem is with

*"Firestone didn't give us all the information and we feel as betrayed as the Venezuelan people."*

**Hector Rodriguez**  
Ford sales director

the tires," Rodriguez said.

"In 1999, while Firestone was assuring us that the tires had no problems, they were secretly compiling information and data about defective tires," Rodriguez said.

"Firestone didn't give us all the information and we feel as betrayed as the Venezuelan people. It's time that Firestone assumes its responsibility and indemnify victims."

Venezuela's Congress is also looking into the controversy, and two accident victims gave brief testimony before a panel that oversees transportation issues. The panel planned to summon the local company's leaders, Jorge Gonzalez of Firestone and Emanuel Cassingena of Ford, to testify Oct. 11.

# U.S. Bank bought by Firststar

**THE ASSOCIATED PRESS**

**MINNEAPOLIS**—Firststar Corp. is buying U.S. Bancorp, parent of Lincoln's U.S. Bank, for about \$21 billion in stock in a deal that would create the nation's ninth largest banking company and extend the consolidation in the financial services business.

The company formed by the deal announced Wednesday would have more than \$160 billion in assets and operations in 24 Western and Midwestern states from California to Ohio.

U.S. Bancorp, the holding company of U.S. Bank, has a large presence in Nebraska and Iowa. The deal was expected to have little or no consumer or employment impact in the two states, bank officials told the Omaha World-Herald.

The deal is the largest in the financial services industry since last month's \$35 billion merger pact between Chase Manhattan and J.P. Morgan.

The dealmaking is driven by the notion economies of scale will improve efficiency and produce savings for their customers. Critics argue the deals will reduce competition in the banking industry and drive financial services fees higher.

The Firststar-U.S. Bancorp deal has been approved by the boards of both companies and they expect it will be completed in the first quarter of 2001, subject to shareholder and regulatory approval.

The combined company will do business under the U.S. Bancorp name and be headquartered in Minneapolis, where U.S. Bancorp is currently based. Firststar is based in Milwaukee.

Under terms of the deal, Firststar will swap 1.265 of its shares for each share of U.S. Bancorp.

Based on Firststar's closing price Tuesday of \$22.25 a share, that would make the deal worth \$28.15 for each U.S. Bancorp share, 21 percent more than U.S. Bancorp's closing price Tuesday of \$23.19.

Shares of Firststar were down \$3.25 to \$19 in late morning trading Wednesday, while shares of U.S. Bancorp rose 18.7 cents to \$23.375.

Jerry Grundhofer, president and chief executive of Firststar, will continue in those positions.

"We are both devoted to high standards of customer service, and we have a lot of other strengths to offer each other in areas ranging from sales culture to information technology," Grundhofer said.

Firststar has about \$74 billion in total assets, nearly 1,200 banking offices and more than 2,200 ATM locations across the country.

U.S. Bancorp has \$86 billion in assets and operates approximately 1,000 banking offices in the Midwest and West.

# NASA: Discovery launch complex

**THE ASSOCIATED PRESS**

**CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla.**—NASA is holding out hope that the rain will stop and the sky will clear before tonight's planned launch of space shuttle Discovery.

Meteorologist John Weems put the odds of acceptable launch weather at 60 percent.

"It's just a matter of timing," Weems said Wednesday. "I've got faith."

Discovery is scheduled to blast off at 9:38 p.m. today on a crucial space station construction mission. It will be the 100th launch for the nearly 20-year-old space shuttle program, a milestone overshadowed by the complexity of the flight.

Seven astronauts will attach steel framework and a docking

port to the international space station. Four back-to-back spacewalks are planned.

"It is one of the most complex station assembly flights that we will conduct," said shuttle program manager Ron Dittmore.

Even though another battery has failed inside the station's new living quarters, no spares will fly aboard Discovery—there's neither time nor room. Instead, spares will be launched on a Russian cargo ship in November, said space station manager Robert Cabana.

Six of the eight electricity-producing batteries in Russia's Zvezda module are working, which is more than enough to support the first permanent crew, Cabana said. One battery failed after it was installed by

shuttle astronauts last month; the second had to be turned off by Russian flight controllers earlier this week.

The first residents will deal with the problem after they move in. NASA astronaut Bill Shepherd and his two-cosmonaut crew are scheduled to lift off aboard a Russian rocket from Kazakhstan on Oct. 30 and arrive at the space station two days later.

In the two years that the space station has been in orbit, the Russian-made batteries have been the No. 1 problem.

Boeing engineer Ed Gholdston blamed poor quality control.

"They worked awfully fast to get some of this stuff put together," he said. "It was a little too fast."

# Suffixes may help .kids sidestep .sex, .xxx sites

**THE ASSOCIATED PRESS**

**NEW YORK**—New Internet domain address proposed for next year could simplify Web surfing worldwide.

As the Internet becomes increasingly clogged, Web users digging for family friendly sites might one day be able to type .kids instead of .com. More lurid material, on the other hand, might be found after a search of the suffix .sex or .xxx.

The new dot addresses could be in use early next year. The organization handling the expansion expects to announce the list of new suffixes by Nov. 20, marking the first major growth in more than a decade.

Adding suffixes to the Internet is akin to adding area codes to the national phone system to accommodate the growing number of customers.

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers,

selected by the federal government in 1998 to handle address policy for the Web, said Tuesday that it has accepted 47 proposals for new domain-name suffixes. The bidding process ended Monday.

Currently, anyone can register a name ending in .com, .net or .org if it is not already in use. Four other suffixes are reserved for specific groups, such as .edu for educational institutions. There are 244 regional suffixes.

Internet registration companies had to pay a nonrefundable \$50,000 application fee, which they would, in theory, recoup through fees charged to register Web sites with the new suffixes.

Nineteen companies submitted a plan for three new suffixes, .info, .site and .web, as global alternatives to .com, .net and .org.

Other plans proposed splitting the Internet into separate channels for kids, businesses and nonprofit groups.

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