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Tesla's Autopilot Was Engaged in Fatal Florida Crash, Investigators Find

Data taken from the Model 3 compact sedan that crashed in Florida showed the driver hadn't touched the steering wheel in the seconds leading up to the collision and made no effort to avoid it, according to the National Transportation Safety Board's preliminary investigation.

Tesla Inc.'s driver-assistance feature was active and the driver's hands weren't detected on the wheel during a fatal crash in March, U.S. safety investigators said Thursday, a finding that could amp up scrutiny of the car maker's Autopilot system as the company pushes for more automation in its vehicles.

Data taken from a Model 3 compact sedan that crashed in Florida showed the driver hadn't touched the steering wheel in the seconds leading up to the incident and made no effort to avoid the collision, according to the National Transportation Safety Board's preliminary investigation. The agency will continue to work to determine a probable cause for the incident.

Tesla says Autopilot isn't a self-driving feature and that users must remain alert and responsible for the car. Still, the company has faced criticism from autonomous-vehicle experts that it hasn't done enough to ensure the system, which controls steering and acceleration, isn't misused.

Tesla said vehicle data showed the driver turned on Autopilot for the first time during his trip 10 seconds before the crash, and immediately removed his hands from the wheel.

"Tesla drivers have logged more than one billion miles with Autopilot engaged, and our data shows that, when used properly by an attentive driver who is prepared to take control at all times, drivers supported by Autopilot are safer than those operating without assistance," a Tesla spokeswoman said in a statement.

Autopilot, a collection of driver-assistance features, is part of Tesla's effort to create vehicles that one day may drive themselves without human oversight. Chief Executive Elon Musk is betting Tesla's efforts to develop robot taxis will raise the company's market value and has promised more than a million Tesla vehicles could be enabled with fully self-driving technology by next year.

The details of the latest crash are reminiscent of a 2016 incident, also in Florida, where the user of Tesla's Autopilot died. The NTSB found Tesla shared in the blame for that incident by allowing the driver to go too long with his hands off the wheel and to ignore warnings to re-engage.

Following the 2016 crash, Tesla made changes to Autopilot to give users less time with their hands off the wheel before receiving a warning. If they ignore the warnings, the system will eventually shut off.

Tesla is being sued in California by the family of man who died in a Model X sport-utility vehicle last year that claims the vehicle's Autopilot improperly steered toward and accelerated into a barrier along the side of a highway. Tesla has declined to comment on the suit.

In the latest crash, the Model 3 on March 1 was headed southbound on a divided highway in Delray Beach, Fla., when a tractor trailer pulled across its lanes in an attempt to make a turn.

The Tesla car, traveling at 68 miles an hour in a 55 mph zone, hit the trailer and continued beneath it—shearing off the roof of the sedan—before coming to a stop after about 1,600 feet, the NTSB said. The Tesla driver died. The truck driver wasn't injured.

Autopilot was engaged at the time of the crash and the system didn't detect the driver's hands on the wheel from less than eight seconds before the impact, the NTSB's preliminary report said.

There are no signs that the driver or the system tried to evade the collision, it said.