

More Kugas aflame

Two more Ford Kuga SUVs caught alight at the weekend as forensic investigators battle over which components are causing the family vehicles to combust.



Experts are divided about whether the fires are being caused by a combination of electrical faults and a plastic fuel line, or by problems with the vehicles' cooling systems. Now investigators want to test materials taken from the vehicle of Reshall Jimmy, burnt to death in December 2015 while on holiday in Wilderness, Western Cape.

Since then at least 43 Kugas made between 2013 and 2014 have caught alight in South Africa. These include two that caught fire outside King William's Town and Port Elizabeth this weekend. Seven of the vehicles have burst into flames so far this year.

This week fire and forensic scientists, hired by Jimmy's family, will take samples of materials from his vehicle. The samples will be sent to a Pretoria laboratory at which they will be burned to determine which gases they emit as products of combustion at which temperatures. This will establish why and how Jimmy, who was found with his seatbelt fastened, was incapacitated and unable to escape from his burning vehicle.

Investigator Danny Joubert, who has investigated five of the Kuga incidents, believes there are two causes of the fires - a failure in a plastic connector on the fuel line in the engine compartment, and a failure of electrical components in the vehicle's passenger compartment.

"The materials will be subjected to controlled burns to determine what gases they emit, whether they are odourless, and their toxicity. This will answer why Jimmy did not escape or at least try to. From my experience, it's clear he was incapacitated by virtually odourless gases," said Joubert.

Police and forensic investigators for insurance companies found that the fire in Jimmy's vehicle was caused by an electrical fault behind the dashboard on the passenger side of the vehicle.

"The engine fires are caused by the fuel line's plastic component cracking and spraying petrol over the hot engine and igniting," said Joubert. "In electrical fires there is usually a problem on an unprotected circuit, which has no fuse. Wiring becomes so hot it raises the temperature of the plastic insulation and other materials to a point at which it releases toxic gases."

But Ford experts who inspected Jimmy's Kuga on three occasions said the fire started at the rear of his vehicle. Ford's news operations director, John Gardiner, said the relative lack of damage to the front of Jimmy's Kuga pointed to the fire starting at the back.

In the latest Ford forensic report, the company's design analysis engineer, James Engle, said the cause of the fire in Jimmy's vehicle was "undetermined" and that neither accidental nor intentional causes could be ruled out. In his report, Engle said he needed access to all evidence contained in the police's inquest docket to complete his investigation.

Ford has since applied to the Cape Town High Court for an order that it be given access to all the evidence in the police docket. Ford has urged owners of affected models to bring their vehicles for the replacement of coolant containers and water hoses, arguing that cracks in the containers cause vehicles to overheat and catch fire.

"While our investigations into the incidents are not complete, we have found that the fires may be a result of engines overheating," said Gardiner.

He said Kuga 1.6l owners had been advised to contact their Ford dealer to "check the coolant concentration level, and for any leaks or damage to the cooling system".

Gardiner said all vehicles sold in South Africa were compliant with the national legislation.

"When a person says his vehicle suddenly died and liquid ran out and ignited, that has nothing to do with overheating but everything to do with a fuel leak," said Gardiner. "When a customer says his car has erratic idling, high fuel consumption and spontaneously starts, as Jimmy complained, that points to an electrical problem."

Joubert said the Jimmy family hoped that Ford would note the evidence that forensic investigators had found - and hoped to find - and would revise its choice of materials used in the vehicles.

Source: The Times