

Report says Explorer could be more stable

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LOS ANGELES — Ford Motor Co., whose Explorer sport utility vehicles have endured a rash of tire-related rollover accidents, passed up a chance to improve the vehicle's stability during a major redesign in the mid-1990s, according to a newspaper report.

A new suspension system installed in 1995 and later model Explorers could have lowered the vehicle's center of gravity by lowering the engine height, according to memos by Ford engineers obtained by the Los Angeles Times.

The company decided to keep the original engine position, in part to hold down redesign costs and to preserve profit margins of nearly 40 percent on the popular Explorer, documents said.

The rollover propensity of Explorers and other SUVs has been prominent recently because of the massive recall of some Firestone tire models that were installed on Explorers and some light trucks.

Ford spokesman Jon Harmon acknowledged the redesign in the 1995 model year made the Explorer's center of gravity slightly higher and its stability index,

which measures rollover propensity, slightly worse.

Harmon said the difference is inconsequential and federal accident statistics show the Explorer has a lower rate of deaths from rollovers and other crashes when compared to vehicles of similar size.

From 1991 to 1999, 1,142 people died in rollover crashes of Explorers, according to data the Times obtained from the federal Fatality Analysis Reporting System. The data suggest that only a small percentage of the rollovers were triggered by tire failure.