

## **Judge orders car database to be made public**

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A federal judge in San Francisco has ordered the government to make public by early next year a database from insurance companies and junkyards that will help buyers of used cars determine whether their vehicle had been stolen or salvaged after a wreck.

U.S. District Judge Marilyn Hall Patel rejected a Justice Department request Monday to allow more time to work on the database, which Congress had ordered to be available by 1997. Instead, she directed the department to make the information it has already gathered publicly accessible by Jan. 30.

Insurers and junkyards will have until March 31 to submit their latest information to the Web site, and will be required to provide monthly updates.

The ruling will save lives, said attorney Deepak Gupta of Public Citizen, the consumer advocacy group that sued the federal government in February along with two Northern California organizations, Consumers for Auto Reliability and Safety and Consumer Action, asking that the information be made public.

Gupta said the database, the National Motor Vehicle Title Information System, "will help consumers avoid purchasing a potentially dangerous used car" by allowing them to check the vehicle's title and mileage and learn whether it had previously been stolen or classified as a "junk" or "salvage" car.

A junk car is one that has been restored after the owner or a junkyard reports it to the state as dismantled. A salvage car has been restored after the owner or insurer reports it as a total loss.

Congress passed a law in 1992 requiring the government to create the information system by January 1996. Later legislation extended the deadline to Dec. 31, 1997, and transferred responsibility from the Transportation Department to the Justice Department.

Implementation was delayed while the Justice Department conducted a cost-benefit study, which concluded in 2001 that the system could produce benefits to car-buyers and others of \$4 billion to \$11.3 billion a year, consumer groups said in court papers. They said the department has no legal justification for further delays.

Justice Department lawyers asked Patel to dismiss the suit - arguing that the plaintiffs had waited too long to file it - and also said no court action was needed because the department would be ready to roll out the system on its own in a few months.

Patel refused to dismiss the suit and instead set an implementation date, which the Justice Department did not contest at Monday's hearing.

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