

Tesla Sued Over Another Fatal Crash in Growing Scrutiny of Doors



The vehicle on fire following the crash.Source: Court Documents

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Takeaways by Bloomberg AIHide

- Tesla Inc. was sued over a crash in Washington state that left one person dead and another seriously injured after rescuers allegedly struggled to open the vehicle's doors.
- The lawsuit claims Tesla's "unique and defective door handle design" rendered the doors inoperable and impeded the rescue process.
- The lawsuit accuses Tesla of negligence and misleading customers, arguing that the company knew the door handles could become inoperable after a crash and was aware of fire hazards from the lithium-ion battery pack, but did nothing to address either issue.

[Tesla Inc.](#) was sued over a fiery crash in Washington state that left one person dead and another seriously injured after rescuers allegedly struggled to open the vehicle's doors, the latest in a growing body of litigation scrutinizing the company's electrically powered handles.

The claims stem from an accident in January 2023, when Jeffery Dennis and his wife, Wendy, were running errands on a Saturday afternoon in their Model 3 sedan. The electric vehicle "suddenly and rapidly accelerated out of control," hitting a utility pole and bursting into flames, according to the suit, which was filed Friday in federal court in Washington state.

Tesla's "unique and defective door handle design" rendered the doors inoperable and impeded the rescue process, according to the complaint. Wendy Dennis died at the scene and Jeffery Dennis suffered injuries including burns to his legs.

"Several bystanders ran to the vehicle and attempted to assist Jeff and Wendy Dennis but the Model 3's door handles would not operate," lawyers representing Jeffery Dennis and the estate of his wife said in the lawsuit. "Several good Samaritans even attempted to use a baseball bat to break the car windows to help."

Tesla didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

Electric door controls have drawn attention since a Bloomberg News investigation uncovered incidents in which people were seriously injured or died after they were unable to open doors following a loss of power, particularly after crashes.

Read More: [Tesla Doors Can Trap People Desperate to Escape](#)

The lawsuit comes weeks after one was [filed against Tesla](#) in Wisconsin over a Model S crash that killed five occupants who allegedly became trapped in a fast-moving inferno when the doors wouldn't

open. Separately, Tesla was [sued in October](#) over claims that defects in the doors of a crashed Cybertruck in Piedmont, California, made it a “death trap” by preventing three college students from escaping before they died of smoke inhalation.

And in July, a lawsuit was filed on behalf of the sole survivor of a Tesla crash in Murrieta, California, in which three teenagers died.



Low-Voltage Battery

The new lawsuit accuses Tesla of negligence and misleading customers, arguing that Elon Musk’s company knew the door handles could become inoperable after a crash and was aware of fire hazards from the lithium-ion battery pack, but did nothing to address either issue. It also claims that the Model 3 involved in the crash had a defect that caused the vehicle to suddenly accelerate out of control and that the automatic emergency braking system failed.

Tesla vehicles have two batteries: one for low-voltage power to interior functions like windows, doors and the touchscreen, and the high-voltage pack that propels the car. If the low-voltage battery dies or is disabled — which can happen after a serious crash — the doors may not unlock and must be opened manually from the inside. While there are mechanical releases inside Teslas, many owners and passengers are unfamiliar with where they’re located or how to operate them.

The [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) disclosed in September that it’s [investigating](#) whether some Tesla doors are defective, citing incidents in which exterior handles stopped working and trapped children and other occupants inside. Franz von Holzhausen, Tesla’s design chief, told Bloomberg that month that the company is [working on a redesign](#) of its door handles to make them more intuitive for occupants “in a panic situation.”

The case is Dennis v. Tesla, 3:25-cv-06052, US District Court, Western District of Washington (Tacoma).