

Technical Service Bulletins And Your Fiero

Technical Service Bulletins (also called TSBs) are the manufacturer's method of communicating information about the vehicles they make to the dealerships that sell and service their products. Automakers use these bulletins to inform dealers about the deficient conditions that can become evident after a vehicle leaves the factory. Bulletins focus on non-safety-related defects that might affect a vehicle's performance or longevity, such as parts that fail prematurely or that don't perform as intended. A particular vehicle model may generate dozens of service bulletins over its lifetime.

TSBs advise service technicians as to how to diagnose and repair a problem and specify the tools, techniques, and the required parts needed. Bulletins also can alert dealers to other issues, such as changes in recommended tire pressure or lubricants, repair procedures, and maintenance requirements. Technical Service Bulletins are not recalls. Therefore, a TSB will not necessarily entitle customers to free repairs, but some bulletins may result in extended warranty coverage for a specific issue.

Additionally, a TSB issued for the make and model vehicle you own will not necessarily mean that the TSB applies to your car. Often, a deficient condition may apply only to a specific portion of the production run, on vehicles driven in certain parts of the country, under certain conditions, or vehicles equipped with specific options.

The reason Technical Service Bulletins are needed is because a mass-produced product, such as an automobile, contains thousands of parts, produced by hundreds of manufacturers, which may not have experienced all of the in-service conditions the vehicles experience during daily use. Parts from the various suppliers can vary in ruggedness and tolerance; and problems can result from assembly line issues. These problems may not become apparent in manufacturer testing or during initial vehicle use, but may develop over time.

Consider for instance the 2.5L 4-cylinder engine in some Fieros. This engine was used in thousands of other GM products before being adopted for use in the Fiero. However, seemingly minor modifications necessary for its use in the Fiero resulted in problems, some of which were recognized during product testing, and others that were not revealed until the vehicles were on the road and subjected to actual in-service rigors. As the problems develop and vehicles are returned to the dealerships for service, the symptoms are recorded and patterns are recognized by the service technicians or the manufacturer's quality control technicians who determine the proper corrective action. While sometimes written by engineers employed by the vehicle's manufacturers, many TSBs are authored by the service technicians themselves. Some problems may have more than one cause, and there may be more than one way to solve the problems so it is not uncommon for multiple TSB to be issued for a single deficient condition.

If a pattern is discovered, a Technical Service Bulletin is issued to the dealerships so that the service departments can perform the appropriate repairs. TSBs can contain information such as recalls, campaigns, corrective action to a common problem, changes in the specified parts, special service procedures, and warranty extensions. TSBs continue to be issued for the entire life of a vehicle. For instance, a recent Fiero TSB was issued in April of 2011. There are over 400 TSB that *could* relate to the Fiero.

Special Service Procedures

There are three levels of TSBs, the least serious of which is the special service procedures. These include information for the service technicians relative to performing periodic maintenance. Special service procedures can involve substituting a fluid or part that differs from that which the vehicle was originally equipped, methods for replacing parts, special tools necessary for changing parts, a change to the factory service manual, or information on repair and replacement policies. Many of these are not actually vehicle specific and in most cases the vehicle owner will not be notified or aware of the special service procedures. Many of the TSBs that are not specific to the Fiero address conditions such as methods for cleaning stains from aluminum wheels, transmission identification (an automatic transmission could be used on many different GM models), retrofitting vehicle air conditioning systems from R-12 to R-134A, and warranty information or changes. Therefore, if a TSB is issued for a Chevrolet Cavalier and the same part was used on a Fiero, the TSB will be associated with both cars. For example, a TSB on cleaning or repairing aluminum wheels will likely be applicable to many different models. On the other hand, a TSB was issued relative to the oil filter used on the 2.5L engines in the Fiero that does not necessarily apply to other GM vehicles equipped with the same engine. This change was actually part of the recall notice.

Corrective Action

The second type of TSB is the corrective action to a common problem. These are problems relating to design

defects, premature part failures, specification changes, or design changes. These types of problems are usually found after the vehicle has been driven many miles. Not all parts are manufactured perfectly. Some parts may not meet the original specification, or were not specified with sufficient durability or tolerance necessary to perform under specific conditions or for multiple thousands of miles. These types of conditions are usually tracked by the dealership service departments and evaluated by the manufacturer. If a pattern develops, the problem will be analyzed and an appropriate resolution developed. One example is TSB 86-10-1, issued in January of 1986 and related to the Fiero sunroof leak, resulting from complaints by owners of early models of water accumulating on the gasket and eventually leaking inside the car. The solution was the inclusion of two drain holes. The later frames included these drain holes and a TSB was sent to the dealerships instructing the service technicians to create the drain holes on Fieros whose owners returned with a complaint of water infiltration at the sunroof. Another example is TSB 87-3-10, issued in March of 1987, related to changing the alignment specifications to reduce complaints of higher than normal tire wear and to slightly improve vehicle handling. These TSBs provide detailed instructions as to how perform these modifications. In the case of a corrective action TSB, the vehicle owners may or may not be notified, or be aware that the TSB specific service was provided.

Campaign

The next type is the Campaign TSB, which are non-safety-related problems or defects identified by the factory. These are typically issued while the car is in production. Often, the vehicle owners are notified to return their vehicles for this specific service. An example of a campaign would be TSB 86-C-11 issued in September of 1988, which affected the 1986 4-cylinder Fiero for the A/C line. Due to the design and angle of the hose, the hoses often developed cracks. The campaign included replacing the hoses with those of an improved design.

Recall

Although technically not a TSB, some vehicles are subjected to recall campaigns, or recalls. Recalls are campaigns related to problems or defects that affect the safety of the occupants of a vehicle. When a manufacturer issues a recall, the owners of all affected vehicles are notified to return their vehicles for service and in some cases are cautioned to alter or cease use of the vehicle until such time as the service has been completed. Recalls are usually a result of complaints to, or investigations by, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA)¹, but can also be issued by the manufacturer without prompting from the NHTSA in an effort to limit their liability and control the outcome, which is why vehicle owners have recently received recall notices more often than in the past.

The most publicized recall example related to the Fiero is that of the Fiero engine fires. Pontiac issued two recalls for this potential problem. The first recall was TSB 84-C-15B, issued in February of 1988, which addressed items in the engine compartment that could contribute to a fire. This recall only affected the 1984 Fieros. The second recall, TSB 88-C-23, issued in June of 1990, addressed the potential for engine fires for all model year Fieros with all engines.

Each TSB and recall will list the subject and all models affected, if it relates to more than one model; it then further indicates which vehicles within a model range are included. For instance TSB 87-1-02, from September of 1986, which details the procedure on the removal and installation of the fastback GT quarter windows, obviously only affected fastback GT model Fieros, and not notchback models. The TSB will describe the condition or reason for the TSB, the cause of the deficient condition, the corrective action, and then, if required, a detailed step by step procedure as to how to perform the repair or corrective action. Photographs or illustrations may also be included.

The differences between a recall and a TSB is that the ensuing recall maintenance/repair work is usually done at no charge to the car owner, regardless of the car's warranty status. Manufacturers are under no mandate to notify vehicle owners of TSBs, but are required to notify vehicle owners for recalls. There is no obligation to do TSB repairs for free or at reduced charges to the owner since the manufacture does not *require* the repair to be performed and does not reimburse the dealership for performing the repairs. When the vehicle's manufacturer issues a recall, they not only require the dealership to perform the repair, but will reimburse the dealership for the cost of the repair.

Many of the TSBs can be found on the internet if you know the TSB number. A few websites keep a list of all the TSBs sorted by manufacturer, model, year, and engine type, however many of these sites require a fee (ranging from \$26.00 to \$45.00) to access the information. For your convenience, the number and title of all TSBs related to Fieros, sorted by year and engine, are on the NIFE website (www.fierofocus.com) under the Tech Tips tab. Once you find a TSB with which you are concerned, you can go to any GM dealership and ask the service advisor to print out the

TSB, which they will generally do for free. It should be noted that some sites only provide information for vehicles up to fifteen years old and therefore may not have information relative to Fieros.

Other sources for TSBs include the following:

- The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. You can find free summaries of many Technical Service Bulletins for a specific vehicle (along with details about safety investigations, complaints, and other information) by entering a vehicle's year, make, and model at SaferCar.gov; click on the "Service Bulletins" tab. You can order Technical Service Bulletins from this website. Although the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, which runs the website, charges research and copying fees, you shouldn't have to pay anything if you're ordering less than 100 pages (bulletins typically are one to five pages), but you'll have to wait four to six weeks because the copies are sent by mail.
- Repair shops. If you have an independent mechanic that has Technical Service Bulletin access, they may be willing to provide it to you.
- Vehicle manufacturers. Some automakers give customers access to their bulletins, but it can be costly.
- Car websites, club websites, and message boards. Some vehicle enthusiast websites and forums post Technical Service Bulletins.

Don't assume, when purchasing a Fiero, that all of the Technical Service Bulletin and recall repairs and modifications have been performed. With the aid of the Technical Service Bulletins, we should be able to enjoy driving our Fiero's for another 30+ years.

David Kopielski, former NIFE Club Member; Christopher Sass Editorial Staff

Footnotes:

¹The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is an agency of the Executive Branch of the U.S. government and part of the Department of Transportation. NHTSA was officially created in 1970 by the Highway Safety Act of 1970 in response to complaints of vehicle safety. The first recall was presumably issued by the NHTSA in 1971 for failure of motor mounts on GM vehicles.