

STELLANTIS

Jeep plug-in hybrid owners have 'trust issues' after latest recalls

The brand plans to give those impacted \$100 gift cards and vehicle loaners.

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Jeep's popular plug-in hybrids have been hit with multiple serious recalls in recent months, and owners — a loyal group who often trade tips and photos of their rigs online — are getting increasingly fed up.

First came an over-the-air software update glitch in mid-October that led to many Wrangler 4xe drivers suddenly losing power on the road. A couple of weeks later came a stark warning that 320,065 Wrangler and Grand Cherokee 4xe drivers should stop charging and park away from structures due to a potential for battery fires. By November, yet another recall had hit owners of both plug-in Jeep models: Sand inside the engine could cause failure and lead to a loss of power or fire.

Longtime 4xe owners found the battery fire risk recall especially disconcerting: It's the third time in two years that Jeep parent Stellantis NV has issued a directive to halt charging and park outside, and some wonder if the problem was ever fixed before.

“A lot of us have developed a lot of trust issues right now, and a lot of people are getting out of these vehicles,” said Chris Hall, who lives outside of Dayton, Ohio, and drives a 2021 Wrangler 4xe.

Even Hall, who runs a 4xe-focused Facebook group and YouTube channel and has long considered himself a big advocate for the vehicles, is running out of patience. He said he's a "person of grace" who understands not every car coming off a production line is perfect, but he no longer plans to replace his Wrangler with another Jeep when the time comes.

"I feel like Jeep and Stellantis need some accountability," Hall said.

Stellantis told The Detroit News late Friday it would provide \$100 Mastercard gift cards and help provide Jeep loaner vehicles through local dealerships to eligible customers affected by the battery recall — potentially assisting more than 300,000 owners. The gift cards are to help cover extra fuel costs incurred by owners who have fueled up more frequently because they can't charge their 4xe vehicles.

Stellantis spokesperson Kaileen Connelly said the automaker planned to notify owners about the gift cards and loaners over the weekend. She said Jeep is "committed to standing by our owners" and wants to ensure they feel "taken care of every step of the way."

Complaints about the Wrangler 4xe and Grand Cherokee 4xe have piled up recently on social media as well as on the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's website. The recall problems come just as both Stellantis and its profit-driving Jeep brand are trying to resuscitate sales and repair other reputational issues garnered over the last few years.

Some drivers told NHTSA they were frustrated by how long the recall repairs were taking and expressed broad concern about the fire risk and the ongoing directive to park outside or charge — a request to essentially "avoid normal use due to risks of vehicle fire and sudden loss of propulsion," as one put it.

Other drivers of both models have flagged incidents where they lost power on the road. "While driving on the highway at 65 mph, the car suddenly lost power in middle of traffic and stopped," one Grand Cherokee driver wrote to the federal

agency. "I was barely able to park on side of the road and was facing a severe risk of being crashed into!"

Both of Jeep's 4xe models have sold relatively well and attracted new customers to the off-road brand since hitting the market a few years ago. Last year, Jeep sold 27,590 Grand Cherokee plug-ins, and 55,554 of the Wrangler plug-in version in the United States. The SUVs offer enough all-electric range to tackle many daily errands or short work commutes, plus the security of a gas engine that can kick in any time.

But the future of the technology at the automaker isn't entirely clear amid a shift in priorities toward other types of hybrid powertrains in addition to the recent problems. Jeep announced a 2026 version of the Grand Cherokee 4xe is coming, but hasn't yet confirmed details of a 2026 Wrangler 4xe.

Stellantis CEO Antonio Filosa recently told investors that the automaker plans to put more focus on traditional hybrid technology that doesn't plug in — including with its all-new Jeep Cherokee hybrid. He said the automaker "really believes in that technology," foresees growing popularity for it in the United States, and plans to install it into additional models.

"Plug-in hybrid is a little different," Filosa said. "We have led in plug-in hybrid market, which is good, but we don't see the same growth than in (traditional) hybrid."

Sam Fiorani, vice president of global vehicle forecasting at AutoForecast Solutions LLC, said Stellantis has less motivation to sell plug-in hybrids in the United States now amid looser emissions standards under the Trump administration. The first sign the company was pulling back from the technology was when it cancelled plans for a plug-in hybrid version of the Jeep Gladiator pickup earlier this fall.

As for the recent string of 4xe recalls, Fiorani said he doesn't think it will hurt the Jeep brand at large much. "Jeep has always had a spotty reputation when it came to quality, but it never really seemed to slow down the fans," he said.

The over-the-air software update glitch affecting as many as 24,238 Wranglers arrived on a Friday and immediately began causing problems, said Mike Missak, who owns a 2024 Wrangler 4xe and, like Hall, runs a YouTube channel and other social media that often discusses Jeep's plug-in hybrids.

Owners who completed the update began dealing with sudden losses of drive power. Missak, an Illinois resident, limped his into his local dealership and saw other Jeeps like his arrive on flatbeds while he was there. Stellantis was able to correct the software update issue within a few days and stated a final remedy was "under development."

A few weeks later, the recall came out advising both Wrangler and Grand Cherokee 4xe drivers to park outside and stop charging due to concerns with the Samsung SDI battery pack — the third such recall directive for some owners since late 2023. (A separate recall earlier this year affecting 91,787 Grand Cherokee 4xe vehicles also involved an issue related to the battery, which the company warned in some instances led to an "unexpected loss" of power while driving.)

Stellantis said that in rare circumstances, "a battery pack may contain cells with separator damage," which along with other interactions "may lead to a vehicle fire." Stellantis said it was aware of 19 such fires, including in vehicles that had received the prescribed repair under a prior recall. NHTSA issued a "Consumer Alert" bulletin about the issue that noted at least one injury related to the defect.

The automaker said it expects that a remedy for the battery problem will be available starting this week. The fix involves a software update to the battery pack control module that will improve detection of any damage to the separators. If damage is detected, battery charging will be disabled and the battery will be replaced at no charge, a statement from spokesperson Frank Matyok said. The company also plans to provide a warranty extension on the batteries related to this problem.

Since the earlier two recalls, the company said it has gained "a deeper understanding of the factors involved," and had developed "a more comprehensive remedy" to fix the problem.

In November came the recall of 112,859 vehicles about potential sand in the engine. It said some of the SUVs "may have been built with an engine which may be contaminated with sand from the casting process," and this can cause catastrophic engine failure, potentially triggering a loss of propulsion, fire, or both. Customers may hear a knocking noise or see a malfunction indicator lamp prior to failure, Stellantis said.

The company added it's aware of 36 fires and 50 confirmed reports of vehicles losing power, plus other service reports that could be related.

"All three of them are waiting on repairs," said Missak, whose Wrangler falls under all of the recent recalls. "We're in limbo-land on all three."

Missak usually parks his Jeep in the garage, but now it sits outside in the snow. He's spending more on gas because he can't charge it. And the latest round of recalls have raised new questions about the vehicle's safety: Missak had planned to turn the Jeep over to his daughter when she turns 16 soon, but now he's not so sure.

Ryin Gaines, a Pittsburgh resident who drives a 2024 Wrangler 4xe that's been hit with four recalls, said he's having similar safety concerns lately involving his 10-year-old daughter. The 43-year-old knows the chances of a battery fire are low, but figures maybe he shouldn't allow her to sit in the back seat, which is closer to the battery.

"On one hand, I love driving this car — I love the Wrangler, I love the Jeep brand," said Gaines, noting he enjoys taking the SUV's top off in the summer, and his daughter thinks it looks cool, too. "On the other hand, should I put (her) in this? Should I put (her) in the front seat?"

He added: "Every time I get into this car and drive from point A to point B, I don't feel safe like I used to feel. That's a problem," especially, he said, for a car that starts at about \$50,000.

Rodrigo Sagastegui, who lives outside Denver and drives a 2023 Wrangler 4xe, said he's largely been happy with the SUV since he bought it used over the summer. He liked the torque and often not needing to fill the tank for 900 or 1,000 miles, plus its off-roading capability.

But the recent recalls have brought the 52-year-old some pause. He said he's opted to keep charging the battery for his daily commute — but he's no longer parking in the garage, which means snow has at times piled up on the Jeep in recent weeks.

"It is somewhat annoying, but manageable, knowing I am taking some risks," Sagastegui said. "My tolerance level might be significantly higher than others'."

Both Hall and Missak said they'd like to see more communication from Jeep about the recent issues. Too often, customer service can't help with questions, Hall said, and dealers also don't always have clarity on the necessary repairs.

"No manufacturer is immune from a recall," Missak said. "But enough is enough with some of this stuff."

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