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4 area accident victims sue tire firm, Ford

By **RICHARD GREEN Jr.**
Of The Post and Courier staff

Four Charleston residents are suing Bridgestone/Firestone Inc. and Ford for allegedly defective design of tires and sport utility vehicles involved in two recent accidents.

None of the passengers suffered life-threatening injuries, but both Ford Explorers careened off the road after rear-tire blowouts of Firestone ATX tires, according to the lawsuits filed recently in Charleston County Court of Com-

mon Pleas.

Bridgestone/Firestone has recalled 6.5 million Firestone ATX, ATX II and Wilderness AT tires last month. The tires, standard equipment on Ford Explorers and several other Ford models, have been linked to more than 100 U.S. traffic deaths and more than 400 injuries.

On Sept. 18, 1999, Elizabeth Henebery and Martha Sue Cochran were riding in Henebery's 1996 Explorer on Interstate 26 when a rear tire blew out, sending the SUV into a stand of pines, the lawsuit states.

The car bounced, turned around 360 degrees and hit a tree.

In June, Wyatt D. Brooks was driving his 1996 Explorer on I-26 with his two small children in the back seat, the lawsuit says. A rear tire blew out, and the SUV swerved off the road and over an embankment. The truck rolled over and came to rest on a service road.

The lawsuits seek unspecified actual and punitive damages against the tire and auto manufacturers for faulty product design and negligence for not notifying people soon-

er of problems that have been apparent since 1992.

The suits also accuse Ford of telling customers to under-inflate the Firestone tires, which worsens the problem.

Anthony Forsberg of the Mason Law Firm, who filed three suits in the two accidents, said Tuesday that he did not know how many people have been injured in South Carolina in similar combinations of tires and vehicles.

According to an analysis by The Washington Post published this

week, Ford Explorers have a higher rate of tire-related accidents than other sport utility vehicles, even when fitted with tires other than Firestones.

Ford says the Post analysis is faulty because the number of accidents examined was too small to be meaningful. They also said accident databases don't always accurately identify vehicles and that Explorers shouldn't be compared to the full range of SUVs.

Attorney General Charlie Condon sued Bridgestone/Firestone in Au-

gust trying to force the tire manufacturer to include South Carolina earlier in its phased-in tire recall.

The recall starts in states that had the most reported accidents: California, Texas, Arizona and Florida. In the fall, Oklahoma, Nevada, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi and Tennessee would be the focus. South Carolina and the rest of the country would be addressed by 2001.

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4 AREA ACCIDENT VICTIMS SUE TIRE FIRM, FORD

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