U.S. regulators stepped up their investigation of Toyota Motor Corp. on Tuesday, demanding documents from the Japanese auto maker to determine if it conducted recent safety recalls "in a timely manner."

Separately, Toyota said it plans to temporarily halt production at two U.S. plants as it adjusts inventory levels. The company expects that the recalls will reduce its North American sales by about 80,000 vehicles.

The increasing pressure by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration on Toyota comes a week before two congressional panels plan to hold hearings on the car maker's troubles.

Some lawmakers have questioned NHTSA's response to the problems, and the agency has sought in recent weeks to show it is cracking down on safety concerns.

"NHTSA's actions related to the Toyota recalls trouble me, especially as reports of sudden acceleration in Toyota vehicles predate the recalls by at least two years," Rep. John Dingell (D., Mich.), a senior member of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, said earlier this month. He said he plans to "ask frank questions" at the hearing his committee plans next week.

NHTSA Administrator David Strickland, who took office in January, is scheduled to testify next week in Washington, as is his boss, U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood. Also scheduled to appear are an auto-safety expert and a consumer advocate who have faulted NHTSA for what they describe as being too soft on car makers when it comes to vehicle safety.

U.S. Intensifies Toyota Probe
Regulator Demands Internal Documents Before Hearings; Company to Idle Two Plants as Sales Fall

By JOSH MITCHELL And KATE LINEBAUGH

Toyota plans to idle its Georgetown, Ky., sedan plant for up to four days.

Toyota Motor Corp. ADS(TM) 76.01 -1.04 4:03p.m.

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A U.S. law requires car makers to notify NHTSA within five days of spotting a safety defect and then promptly conduct a recall, the agency said. The law provides a maximum civil fine of as much as $16.4 million but no auto maker has been fined more than $1 million for a violation.

“Our top priority is safety and we expect that all manufacturers address automotive safety issues quickly and in a forthright manner,” Mr. Strickland said in a statement announcing the stepped-up investigation.

NHTSA is examining three Toyota recalls for reports of sticky gas pedals and sudden acceleration. Consumer complaints to the agency allege that sudden acceleration in Toyotas led to 34 deaths.

Meantime, the company said it is suspending production for two weeks at its truck plant in San Antonio and for one day at its plant in Georgetown, Ky. Toyota is considering stopping production on three additional days in March and April at the Kentucky plant, where it makes Camry, Avalon and Venza sedans.

“We can’t allow inventory to build up too high,” said Mike Goss, a Toyota spokesman. He said the affected workers will be paid and receive additional training on those days. At its plant in Texas, which makes the large Tundra truck, Toyota plans to use the time to install the tooling to make its smaller Tacoma pickup, which the auto maker had planned to do during weekends in March, Mr. Goss said.

Toyota is moving production of the Tacoma truck from a plant in California that is closing at the end of March.

Toyota is reeling after recalling more than six million vehicles in the U.S. over the last five months, which cast a shadow over its reputation as a safety leader.

Last month, the Japanese company halted U.S. sales of eight models, including the Camry and Corolla, affected by a recall for sticky accelerators pedals, and earlier this month idled some of its North American production lines for a week. About 80% of the vehicles involved in the sales halt are back on sale after Toyota dealers repaired the gas pedals.

To win back consumer confidence and spawn sales, Toyota is looking into options such as a new buyer incentive program or enhanced warranty protection, according to three Toyota dealers briefed of the possibilities.

Write to Josh Mitchell at joshua.mitchell@dowjones.com and Kate Linebaugh at kate.linebaugh@wsj.com

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**Affected Models**

Review details on models in each recall.

**Escalating Problem**

Track the NHTSA-Toyota relationship.

**Recall Roadblocks**

Timeline of major U.S. auto recalls

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**More photos and interactive graphics**

- Photos: Affected Models

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