

Volvo Bellows Failures Vex Owners

By Caroline Ajootian

An ongoing problem with the bellows on certain Volvo sterndrives leaves boaters at a loss for what to do next

Bellows failures on certain Volvo sterndrive engines have left dozens of owners frustrated, in some cases unable to use their boats, and paying thousands of dollars in expenses related to the failures. The gas-powered engines involved are Volvo's 5.7L and 8.1L models equipped with XDP outdrives. The majority of complaints received by BoatU.S. concern 2006 and 2007 models. The failures are well-documented in a series of service bulletins issued by Volvo, which has added to engine owners' anger. Some say they've been unable to get assistance because of tight deadlines for filing claims and strict limits on what Volvo will cover. Owners who've contacted BoatU.S. are asking why, if Volvo knows the bellows are defective and allow water to damage U-joints and gimbal bearings, should consumers have to pay any costs to haul out boats so replacements can be installed or to correct problems?

The service bulletins were issued by Volvo Penta in late 2008 and again in April 2009 and July 2009. They describe how the U-joint bellows installed on some of Volvo's composite XDP outdrives (see box for models and serial numbers) can buckle and make contact with the U-joint during high-speed turning or loading maneuvers. The flexible waterproof bellows are intended to protect the U-joint linking the outdrive unit to the inboard engine. Volvo explains that the series of bulletins reflects "continuous improvement" as bellows designs evolved in response to failures.

"While we would've liked to avoid multiple replacements of bellows on XDP drives, we weren't happy with the performance and longevity of the earlier designs," said Tony Kelleher, director of Product and Customer Support. Volvo Penta told BoatU.S. that approximately 2,400 5.7L and 8.1L engines both in the

U.S. and worldwide are affected. BoatU.S. has received 12 documented reports of bellows failures and related complications, but online chat rooms frequented by boat owners and marine surveyors contain dozens more accounts. Volvo has determined that bellows failures are most likely to occur in heavy boats equipped with twin 5.70Si or 8.10Si engines, where excess torque is created in the drive area during high-speed or high-load turns. Abrasion of the bellows can cause water entry and possible cor-

rosion of the U-joint and gimbal bearing, according to reports BoatU.S. has received from owners and engine mechanics.

rosion for dealers to file repair reimbursement claims, then later extended this deadline until November 1, with all work completed a month earlier.

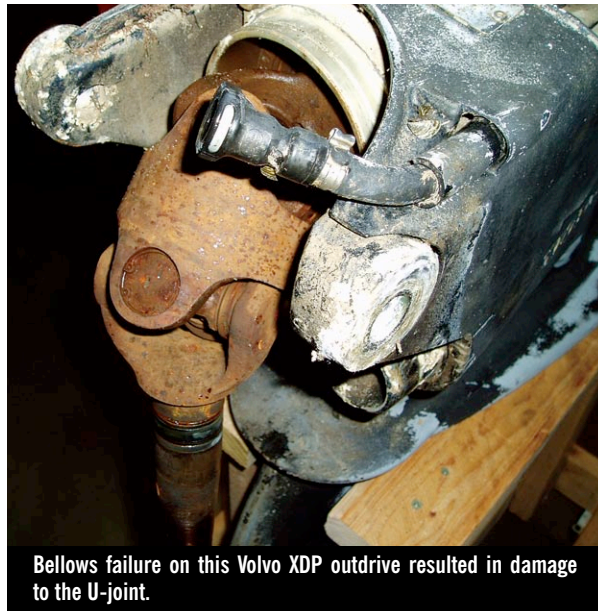
"We felt that it was important and appropriate to put a reasonable time limit on repairs in order to increase the sense of urgency to get the repairs completed and avoid collateral damages to the drive," said Kelleher.

"If a customer still hasn't gotten the repair performed, we encourage them to take the boat to their dealer and have the dealer contact Volvo Penta service for authorization to perform the repair," he added.

Letters sent to engine owners in April 2009 do not mention the deadline, recommending only that service be done "as soon as possible." At least two boat owners said their dealers didn't perform the work on time, leaving the owners without factory support. Letters sent in August 2009 include information about deadlines.

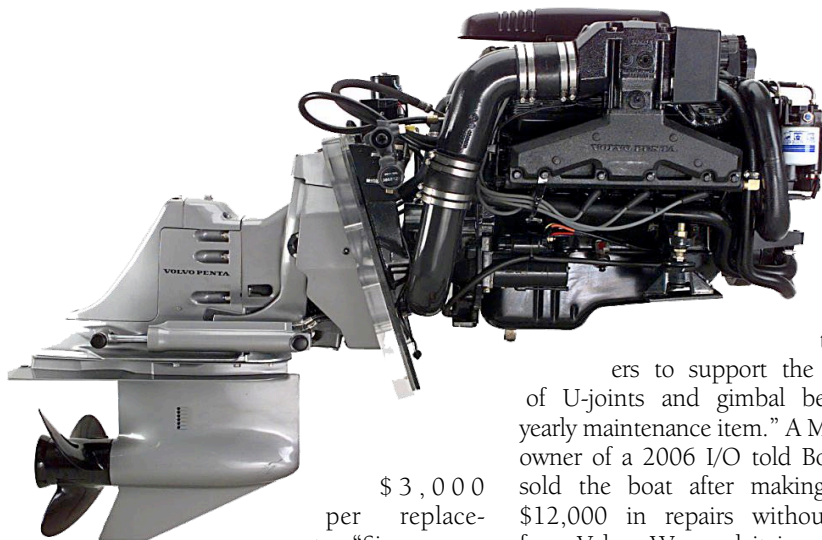
Volvo will cover only the cost of replacing the U-joint bellows, but not costs for hauling the boat out, which is necessary for the job, nor will the engine maker cover the cost of corrosion that may have damaged U-joints and gimbal bearings. In addition, some owners report cracks on the flange of the transom plate, where the hose clamps attach. The plate is made of a composite material. Volvo has not covered this.

In half the reports received by BoatU.S., owners say bellows have failed repeatedly. Sometimes Volvo has covered replacements, sometimes not. The July 2009 bulletin warns dealers to follow bellows installation instructions carefully because "repeat failures will not be considered as defects and will not be covered under warranty." Again, owners can't be sure if repeat failures are due to dealer mistakes or ongoing design problems, a crucial question when remedial work costs \$2,000 to



Bellows failure on this Volvo XDP outdrive resulted in damage to the U-joint.

Along with installing a replacement U-joint bellows kit, the bulletins advise replacing the hose clamps that fasten the bellows to the outdrive and to the transom plate. Replacements of U-joints and gimbal bearings aren't part of the service bulletin campaign. Volvo has helped some owners with this added expense, but has not done so in all cases. Kelleher explained that Volvo authorized dealers to replace bellows and hose clamps "regardless of whether these units are under warranty." At first, Volvo set a deadline of September 1, 2009,



in standing behind their product," he said. "I don't think it's proper for Volvo to ask the customers

to support the replacement of U-joints and gimbal bearings as a yearly maintenance item." A Massachusetts owner of a 2006 I/O told BoatU.S., "We sold the boat after making a total of \$12,000 in repairs without any help from Volvo. We used it in saltwater with the recommended anodes sourced directly from Volvo."

Adding to engine owners' confusion is Volvo's choice of words in describing the bellows repairs. In both the service bulletins distributed to dealers and to letters sent to owners, the repair effort is referred to as a "recall." Turns out, it's not a recall under the definition of the Federal Boat Safety Act, which is a defect that creates a substantial risk of personal injury. Kelleher told BoatU.S. that it's the company's practice to use the word "recall" whenever they

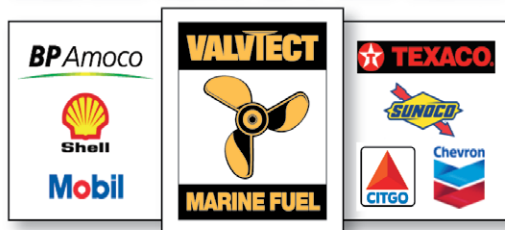
contact customers about a repair issue. Volvo does not consider the bellows problem a safety defect, nor does it represent noncompliance with federal manufacturing regulations, because there are no regulations governing the engine parts involved. This is a conclusion shared by the U.S. Coast Guard, which oversees safety defect recalls of recreational boats and accessories, after the Volvo service bulletin was brought to their attention. Volvo records indicate that 5.70Si and 8.10Si XDP sterndrives with XXP TSK transom shield Spec Numbers 3869293, 3869297, 3869347, 3869348, 3886856, 3886857 may experience bellows failures. All XDP drive units with serial numbers higher than s/n 4251009540 were shipped with new U-joint bellows and are not included in this campaign.

\$3,000 per replacement. "Since purchase, the bellows have been replaced four times, the U-joints and gimbal bearings have been replaced two times," a boat owner in West Chester, Pennsylvania, told BoatU.S. Earlier this year, his mechanic told him the bellows, U-joint and bearing would have to be replaced again. "This will be five bellows and three sets of U-joints and bearings in five years of operation," the owner reported. "My mechanic has informed me that Volvo won't pay for this replacement, a cost of \$2,275. Up to this point Volvo has been supportive

Consumers who own engines that haven't already been repaired should contact their Volvo dealer to obtain repair authorization from the engine maker.

Consumers who own affected engines and who have either received engine repairs but who are still experiencing problems or who have been denied assistance, should contact the BoatU.S. Consumer Protection Bureau, 703-461-2856 or consumerprotection@BoatUS.com

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