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## U.S.-bought cars leave drivers in a bind

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Robert Lamb dutifully jumped through all the Transport Canada hoops.

He did an exhaustive amount of homework, and has a thick file and an extensive trail of emails to prove it.

But the Kirkland resident has now been left in the lurch.

Lamb is the angry owner of a 2008 Honda Civic EXL that was declared a car without a country last week - more than three weeks after he legally imported it from the U.S.

Lamb isn't alone.

Many Canadians have been taking advantage of the surging Canadian dollar to save big bucks by picking up a new set of wheels from a dealer south of the border. There are possibly hundreds who have suddenly been stuck in bureaucratic limbo, said both Lamb and George Iny, president of the Automobile Protection Association.

"The carmakers," Iny declared, "believe in free trade only up to their dealer's doorstep."

Because Canadian retail car prices haven't dropped to the same extent that our loonie has risen, he said, a captive Canadian car market provides "a windfall for them. And they want to hang onto it as long as possible."

Jessie Chauhan, a Transport Canada spokesperson, said last night that she couldn't provide even a ballpark figure for how many Canadians have been caught in the same bind as Lamb - following all the rules, then finding themselves stuck with a car properly imported but later retroactively declared inadmissible.

"We are looking for possible solutions," for Lamb and the others like him, she said.

"We can't discuss specific cases. ... There's nothing else that I can add right now."

Lamb bought his car Oct. 2 at a U.S. dealer for \$21,145 U.S. - a net saving of about \$5,500 Canadian compared with dealer prices north of the border.

Weeks later, on Oct. 29, he got a nasty surprise. His Civic was declared by federal authorities as inadmissible to Canada, apparently on Honda's instructions.

Other 2008 Honda and Toyota passenger cars have also been declared inadmissible:

By Toyota, 2008 models of the Yaris Hatchback, Corolla, Prius and Matrix.

By Honda, all of its 2008 passenger cars other than the 2008 Acura TSX, TL, RL and Honda S2000.

Adding some irony, Lamb's Civic was assembled in Ontario - but he isn't legally permitted to put it on the road anywhere in the country.

His orphan car's temporary in-transit plate expired Oct. 31.

Transport Canada, Chauhan said, depends on manufacturers to certify whether their vehicles meet all Canadian safety, emissions and other regulatory standards.

The manufacturer's decision is then posted on a detailed website maintained by the Registrar of Imported Vehicles, or RIV.

"It's a self-certification regime," Chauhan said.

Honda Canada officials couldn't be reached for immediate comment.

Toyota Canada officials insisted they are following Transport Canada rules about a compulsory anti-theft device that took effect Sept. 1. They refused to provide copies of their correspondence with the RIV.

"The 2007 and 2008 U.S. and Canadian Honda Civic have the same immobilizer (anti-theft device)," Lamb said in a recent detailed email to Transport Canada, citing extensive research he's done with the Insurance Bureau of Canada, certified Honda technicians and others.

Indeed, the RIV's list confirms that 2007 Civics are admissible to Canada.

The suddenly emerging immobilizer barrier, well into the 2008 model year, "is a trumped-up situation," Iny declared.

How many Canadians have been trapped in such a snafu?

Chauham referred all such questions to Gary Moriarty, deputy registrar at the RIV. He's the sole RIV official authorized to talk to media. He hasn't returned calls since Tuesday.

#### OPTIONAL TRIM BEGINS

Calls to the RIV's toll-free line surged to more than 7,000 Tuesday, Chauham said, up from a recent daily range of about 5,000.

"The number of calls started to increase with the rise of the dollar," she said. But it would be speculation, she added, to tie all of the 2,000 additional calls to people with problems like Lamb's.

Lamb has already drawn his own conclusions:

With Transport Canada's help, he said, "the manufacturers ... are putting the boots to the average Canadian consumer" by erecting fresh regulatory roadblocks to discourage Canadians from taking advantage of the Canadian dollar's surge, "attempting to block Canadians from purchasing cars in the U.S."

About a week after he bought his Civic, he said, Honda "told their U.S. dealerships not to sell to Canadians."

When Lamb drove his new EXL over the border Oct. 5, "I followed all the procedures as described in all the government bulletins.

"I paid my GST and the fees required by the RIV.

"The border services personnel of both countries approved all of my documents."

Because the dollar keeps getting stronger, Lamb said, the deal that saved him \$5,500 a month ago would today save another Honda buyer about \$7,000.

"It's the small guy that's getting ripped off here - there was never any problem when people were saving \$30,000 or \$40,000 bringing in fancy cars from the States."

Details: Import checklist for Canadians, along with registry of admissible and inadmissible vehicles: [www.riv.ca](http://www.riv.ca) or 1-888-848-8240.

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