

Land Rover design blamed

The Discovery SUV's maker is ordered to pay \$21.1 million in an L.A.-area injury case.

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A Los Angeles judge has ordered automaker Jaguar Land Rover to pay \$21.1 million to a Simi Valley man who was paralyzed in 2003 when his Land Rover Discovery sport utility vehicle rolled over several times after a collision on the 118 Freeway.

L.A. County Superior Court Judge Robert H. O'Brien cited two key reasons for his decision: The vehicle's high center of gravity made it susceptible to rolling over, and its roof collapsed too easily, causing Sukhsagar Pannu to suffer a debilitating spinal cord injury.

O'Brien issued the judgment May 18 after a trial.

Pannu, 53, who had played competitive field hockey in Hong Kong, permanently lost the use of his arms and legs as a result of the injury. He lives with his parents and three children, who provide him around-the-clock care.

"This verdict is a wonderful decision for Mr. Pannu. It will give him that extra money he needs to have sufficient caregivers. The system worked for him," said Pannu's attorney, Garo Mardirossian. "Hopefully, other manufacturers will look at this case and say, 'Let's spend the money and make the cars safe.'"

Warren Platt, a Costa Mesa attorney who defended Jaguar Land Rover at the trial, said the company was disappointed by the verdict and intended to appeal. He argued at trial that full blame should have been placed on the 16-year-old driver whose car sideswiped Pannu's vehicle at more than 80 mph, causing Pannu to lose control.

Platt said he considered the verdict an anomaly that should not concern any of the thousands of Americans driving Discovery models manufactured in the 1990s.

"The rollover, in our judgment, was not due to any problem with the vehicle. The roof was properly designed and the same result would have occurred with any other roof," Platt said. "There's nothing wrong with this truck."

Attorneys for both sides said they were unaware of any larger product-liability verdicts involving Land Rover SUVs.

The \$21-million hit comes at a difficult time for Indian auto manufacturer Tata Motors, which acquired Jaguar Land Rover — and the company's liabilities — from Ford Motor Co. in 2008.

The company recently refinanced the \$3-billion debt it incurred from the purchase but continues to struggle with slumping sales, an analyst said.

"JLR is a challenged company at the moment. It needs to develop new vehicles targeting new and smaller segments, as well as low-emission technology, in order to survive," said Paul Newton, an analyst at research firm IHS Global Insight in Lexington, Mass.

"The company needs to stem the cash burn we believe they are still suffering. Land Rover is bleeding badly as sales evaporate."

Tata spokeswoman Debasis Ray described the purchase of Jaguar Land Rover as a "sound acquisition ... of two iconic, global brands with significant technology capabilities, an exciting product lineup and a committed team."

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