

2nd crash renews safety concerns for Boeing's prized new jet

March 12 2019, by David Koenig



In this Dec. 15, 2018, photo released by Xinhua News Agency, invited guests take photos of the Boeing 737 Max 8 airplane deliver to Air China during a ceremony at Boeing Zhoushan 737 Completion and Delivery Center in Zhoushan, east China's Zhejiang Province. China's civilian aviation authority has ordered all Chinese airlines to ground their Boeing 737 Max 8 planes on Monday, March 11, 2019 after one of the aircraft crashed in Ethiopia. The authority said the one-day action was made out of safety concerns because the crash was similar to one in Indonesia last year. (Xu Yu/Xinhua via AP)

The second deadly crash of a prized new airplane in five months has renewed safety concerns about the 737 Max that could shape Boeing's fortunes for many years.

The 737 Max is the newest version of the 737, the best-selling airliner ever. Since debuting in 2017, Boeing has delivered more than 350 of them in several versions that vary by size.

Dozens of airlines around the world have embraced the [plane](#) for its fuel efficiency and utility for short and medium-haul flights.

Boeing has taken more than 5,000 orders for the various Max versions, and they constitute the largest share of the company's backlog of nearly 5,900 planes. They carry list prices from \$100 million to \$135 million, although airlines routinely get deep discounts.

The plane suffered its first fatal accident in October, when a 737 Max 8 operated by Lion Air plunged into the Java Sea, killing 189 people. Boeing bounced back, however, with little apparent effect on new orders.

However, the second deadly crash for a Max 8 on Sunday in Ethiopia, which killed all 157 people on board, could prove far more damaging if investigators find fault in Boeing's design or airlines and their passengers lose confidence in the jet.



In this Oct. 4, 2017, file photo, SilkAir's new Boeing 737 Max 8 aircraft is seen through a viewing gallery window parked on the tarmac of Singapore's Changi International Airport. China's civilian aviation authority has ordered all Chinese airlines to temporarily ground their Boeing 737 Max 8 planes after one of the aircraft crashed in Ethiopia. The Civil Aviation Administration of China said the order was issued at 9 a.m. Beijing time Monday, March 11, 2019 and would last nine hours. (AP Photo/Wong Maye-E, File)

Already airlines in Ethiopia, Mexico, China, Brazil, Argentina and Indonesia have temporarily grounded their Max 8s, in addition to Caribbean carrier Cayman Airways, Comair in South Africa, and Royal Air Maroc in Morocco.

Crucially, however, there was no outward sign that the influential U.S. regulator, the Federal Aviation Administration, would do the same.

Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao said her department, which

includes the FAA, was "very concerned" and monitoring developments around Sunday's crash. She said she met with acting FAA Administrator Dan Elwell to discuss the situation "and what are our possible paths forward." She didn't say whether the agency was considering grounding any planes.

It's unusual for authorities to take the step of grounding planes, and it's up to each country to set standards on which planes can fly and how those planes are maintained, said Todd Curtis, an aviation safety analyst who directs the Airsafe.com Foundation.

In the last major FAA recall, the agency grounded Boeing 787 passenger jets in 2013 after several instances in which lithium-ion batteries overheated. The plane was relatively new at the time. United was the only U.S. carrier affected, with six planes grounded.



In this Nov. 28, 2018, file photo, National Transportation Safety Committee investigator Nurcahyo Utomo holds a model of an airplane during a press conference on the committee's preliminary findings on their investigation on the crash of Lion Air flight 610, in Jakarta, Indonesia. China's civilian aviation authority has ordered all Chinese airlines to temporarily ground their Boeing 737 Max 8 planes after one of the aircraft crashed in Ethiopia. The Civil Aviation Administration of China said the order was issued at 9 a.m. Beijing time Monday, March 11, 2019 and would last nine hours. (AP Photo/Achmad Ibrahim, File)

Late on Monday, the FAA issued a statement saying that while others have drawn similarities between the Indonesia and Ethiopia crashes, the agency was not.

"This investigation has just begun and to date we have not been provided data to draw any conclusions or take any actions," the FAA said.

The FAA also said that no later than April it expects Boeing will complete changes, including new training for pilots in automated anti-stall technology that is suspected of playing a role in the Lion Air crash. Data released by Indonesian investigators indicates that pilots struggled unsuccessfully to counter the system, which repeatedly pointed the plane's nose down and may have sent it into a death spiral.

A consumer group, FlyersRights.org, urged the FAA to ground the Max 8.

"The FAA's wait-and-see attitude risks lives," said the group's president, Paul Hudson.



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U.S. airlines repeated their belief that the plane is safe.

American Airlines, which operates 24 Max 8s, said it bases its judgment on collecting extensive data on its entire fleet, including the Max 8.

"We have full confidence in the aircraft and our crew members," the carrier's vice president of flight service, Jill Surdeck, said in a memo to employees.

Southwest Airlines operates the largest U.S. fleet of Max planes, with 34 Max 8s. Spokesman Brian Parrish said the airline remains confident in their safety. United has about a dozen Max 9s, which are slightly bigger than the Max 8.

Dozens of Max aircraft crisscrossed the skies over the United States on Monday, and passengers continued to board them and fly without incident. Passengers interviewed at Houston's Hobby Airport were keenly aware of the crash in Ethiopia. They expressed concern but no panic.



In this Nov. 14, 2018, file photo Boeing 737 MAX 8 planes are parked near Boeing Co.'s 737 assembly facility in Renton, Wash. Investigators were rushing to the scene of a devastating plane crash in Ethiopia on Sunday, March 10, 2019, an accident that could renew safety questions about the newest version of Boeing's popular 737 airliner. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren, File)

"I drive in Houston every day," said Brian Browder, who was waiting for a flight to Washington, D.C. "That's the place to be worried."

Still, Browder, who works for a construction-industry trade group and flies several times a month, said he would be "a bit apprehensive" about getting on a 737 MAX.

"They need to explain exactly what happened and why," he said.

Kelly Wells, a health care worker from Austin, believes a catastrophic accident is less likely to happen in the United States.

"Those pilots are very well trained to handle an emergency. I'm in capable hands," she said before a flight on Southwest, which operates the Max, although her flight was not among them.



This photo taken Monday, Feb. 11, 2019 shows an Ethiopian Airlines Boeing

737-800 parked at Bole International Airport in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. An Ethiopian Airlines Boeing 737 Max 8 jetliner carrying 157 people crashed shortly after takeoff from the Ethiopian capital Sunday, March 10, 2019 killing everyone aboard, authorities said. (AP Photo/Ben Curtis)

Peggy Chang Barber, a lawyer for a Houston nonprofit who was on her way to New York, said U.S. airlines are "pretty vigilant" about maintenance and pilot training, and she won't be concerned "unless they find a fault with the plane."

It isn't clear yet whether the plane's technology played a role in the Ethiopian Airlines crash, or whether that accident is related to the deadly Lion Air accident on Oct. 29 in Indonesia.

Even if Boeing must make software or hardware changes to the plane, "it's nothing they can't get past, but it would be an expensive process," said Richard Aboulafia, an aviation consultant with Teal Group.



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"Historically, (airlines) cancel orders because of (fuel) performance shortfalls or because somebody else gave them a discount—not because of safety," Aboulafia said.

The FAA stripped the McDonnell Douglas DC-10 of its airworthiness certificate after numerous safety problems including a 1979 crash in Chicago, yet it still outsold a rival plane made by Lockheed, he said.



In this Dec. 15, 2018, photo, invited guests look at the Boeing 737 Max 8 airplane parked on tarmac after being delivered to Air China at Boeing Zhoushan 737 Completion and Delivery Center in Zhoushan, east China's Zhejiang Province. China's civilian aviation authority has ordered all Chinese airlines to ground their Boeing 737 Max 8 planes on Monday, March 11, 2019 after one of the aircraft crashed in Ethiopia. The authority said the one-day action was made out of safety concerns because the crash was similar to one in Indonesia last year. (Chinatopix via AP)

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