

Pratt & Whitney engine issue adds to airline challenges

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A visitor looks at a Pratt & Whitney engine during the Farnborough Airshow, in Britain in July 2018.

Commercial airlines have faced a tricky balancing act this summer, ramping up service to meet torrid travel demand in a period of labor

shortages and supply chain constraints.

Adding to the challenges: new inspections needed on a class of Airbus planes that may suffer from microscopic "contamination" of metals used to manufacture Pratt & Whitney engines.

Pratt & Whitney's parent company, RTX, formerly Raytheon, announced on July 25 that a "significant portion" of the Airbus A320neo fleet will "require accelerated removals and inspections within the next nine to 12 months."

Company officials described the issue as one of [quality control](#), stressing that there is no immediate risk to flight safety. They blamed a "rare condition in powder metal used to manufacture certain [engine](#) parts."

The defect could affect 1,200 Pratt engines made between late 2015 and mid-2021. In total, the company has produced 3,000 of the engines.

"We're aware of the issue," Airbus said, "and we will be working with Pratt & Whitney and our customers to implement all required inspection plans."

The Federal Aviation Administration told AFP this week that it "is aware of the issue and is in contact with Pratt & Whitney and the affected US operators," an agency spokesperson said.

"The agency will ensure that the appropriate steps are taken."

But more than two weeks after the original announcement by RTX, airlines are still grasping for details on the inspections, as they work in an already stressed operating environment.

The FAA reiterated in early August that it would continue to permit

airlines to reduce flights at New York airports amid shortages of air traffic controllers that have led to fewer flights on bigger planes.

RTX said it will begin inspecting 200 jets by mid-September. It did not say how long the inspections would require.

"The duration of the grounding will depend on having enough maintenance people, and there aren't many right now," said Michel Merluzeau of AIR consultancy.

'Frustrating and disappointing'

To speed the process, Pratt potentially could replace the engines with newer versions, but supply-chain problems have limited the company's output, Merluzeau said.

Discount US carrier Spirit Airlines has been notified that up to 13 of its engines will need to be checked. As a result, the airline will remove seven jets from service after Labor Day, said Chief Executive Ted Christie.

Among US carriers, Spirit has the most Airbus planes affected by the inspections and the most built in the period in question. Its fleet includes about 80 Airbus A320neo planes.

"We will have the equivalent of at least 10 aircraft out of service during most of 2024," Christie said earlier this month on a conference call with analysts.

"This new issue is yet another frustrating and disappointing development," said Christie, noting other [technical problems](#) that have affected Spirit's fleet.

Pratt has told Spirit it will be made "whole" for the problem, but "the details and timings of those reimbursements are unknown as of yet," Christie said.

All 18 of the Airbus A320neo planes received by regional carrier Hawaiian Airlines contain engines built during the period in question, said Chief Executive Peter Ingram.

Even prior to RTX's July announcement, Hawaiian had struggled with availability of the Airbus planes due to shortages of spare engines. During the "worst" period, Hawaiian needed to ground five of the 18 jets, Ingram said.

Hawaiian had planned "for no more than two aircraft to be out of service for the next few months, improving to one in the fourth quarter," Ingram said, before adding that it has not yet assessed the impact of the latest Pratt announcement.

"In the days ahead, we will assess whether we must take any schedule action to mitigate aircraft shortages," he said.

JetBlue, which also has A320neo planes, has not offered a forecast of the impact from the Pratt inspections. The company is "still assessing the longer-term impact with Pratt & Whitney," said Chief Financial Officer Ursula Hurley.

Media reports say other carriers likely to be affected include Germany's Lufthansa, US carrier Delta, India's Indigo, Air New Zealand, Wizz Air of Hungary and Mexico's Volaris.

Despite the difficulties, Merluzeau does not expect Airbus to drop Pratt as a supplier, saying, "This problem seems very isolated."

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