

Alaska Airlines cancels flights on certain Boeing planes through Saturday for mandatory inspections

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Alaska Airlines N704AL, a 737 Max 9 which made an emergency landing at Portland International Airport after a part of the fuselage broke off mid-flight on Friday, is parked at a maintenance hanger in Portland, Ore., Saturday, Jan. 6, 2024. Credit: AP Photo/Craig Mitchell/dyer

Alaska Airlines is canceling through Saturday all flights on Boeing 737 Max 9 planes like the one that suffered an in-flight blowout of a fuselage panel last week as it waits for new instructions from Boeing and federal officials on how to inspect the fleet.

The development came as signs indicate some travelers might try to avoid flying on Max 9 jetliners—at least temporarily.

Seattle-based Alaska Airlines said Wednesday that it would cancel 110 to 150 flights a day while the Max 9 planes remain grounded. By late afternoon, Alaska had canceled about 125 flights—one-fifth of its schedule for the day.

"We hope this action provides guests with a little more certainty, and we are working around the clock to reaccommodate impacted guests on other flights," the airline said on its website.

United Airlines, the only other U.S. carrier that operates the Max 9, had canceled 167 flights because of the grounding order.

The Federal Aviation Administration [grounded all Max 9s](#) in the United States on Saturday, the day after a panel called a door plug blew off an Alaska Airlines jet over Oregon, leaving a hole in the side of the plane. The plug replaces extra doors that are used on Max 9s that are outfitted with more seats than Alaska uses.

The pilots of flight 1282 were able to return to Portland, Oregon, and make a safe emergency landing. No serious injuries were reported.

Investigators with the National Transportation Safety Board said this week they have not found four bolts used to help secure the 63-pound door plug, and they are not certain whether the bolts were missing before the plane took off or broke during the flight.

The FAA approved inspection and repair guidelines developed by Boeing on Monday. However, on Tuesday the agency ordered Boeing to revise the instructions based on "feedback received in response."

The order to revise the guidelines came after Alaska and United reported finding [loose bolts and other problems](#) in the panel doors of an unspecified number of other Max 9s that they had begun to inspect.

Boeing CEO David Calhoun said a Boeing engineer was present during some of the Alaska checks, "and yes, he used that term, loose bolt."

Asked how the plane was allowed to fly in the first place, Calhoun said on CNBC, "Because a quality escape occurred."

Boeing said Wednesday that it was updating inspection procedures based on comments from FAA and the airlines, and the FAA repeated an earlier pledge to let safety determine when the planes fly again. Neither would say how long that might take.

The door plugs are installed by Boeing supplier Spirit AeroSystems, but investigators have not said which company's employees last worked on the plug on the ill-fated Alaska plane.

Earlier this week, Calhoun told employees at the 737 factory in Renton, Washington, that the company was "acknowledging our mistake ... and that this event can never happen again."

Boeing, which is headquartered in Arlington, Virginia, didn't allow reporters to attend the event, but it released a four-minute clip in which Calhoun stressed safety and said that Boeing's airline customers are watching the company's response to the current crisis.

"Moments like this shake them to the bone, just like it shook me to the

bone," he said, adding that Boeing must reassure airlines that the planes are safe.

"We will see our way through to that, but we need to know that we are starting from a very anxious moment for our customers," he told the Boeing employees.

Some travelers are watching the unfolding investigation too.

Kayak, a travel-search site owned by Booking Holdings, said Wednesday that after the blowout on the Alaska flight, it saw a three-fold jump in the number of people filtering their searches to isolate the type of aircraft. The jump—from low numbers, a Kayak spokeswoman acknowledged—led the site to make its airplane-type filter easier to find.

"Anytime an aircraft model becomes a household name, something has gone wrong," said Scott Keyes, founder of the travel site Going.

Keyes said once the FAA clears the planes to fly—"and assuming no other incidents"—the public's memory will fade. Within six months, he predicted, few people will be paying attention to the aircraft type when booking a flight.

The Max—of which there are two models flying, the 8 and larger 9, and two more in development—is the latest version of Boeing's half-century-old 737. Two Max 8 jets crashed in 2018 and 2019, killing 346 people, and the plane [has been dogged](#) by manufacturing quality problems since then.

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