

Boeing jetliner that suffered inflight blowout was restricted because of concern over warning light

January 8 2024, by CLAIRE RUSH and DAVID KOENIG



In this photo released by the National Transportation Safety Board, NTSB Investigator-in-Charge John Lovell examines the fuselage plug area of Alaska Airlines Flight 1282 on Sunday, Jan. 7, 2024, in Portland, Ore. A panel used to plug an area reserved for an exit door on the Boeing 737 Max 9 jetliner blew out Friday night shortly after the flight took off from Portland, forcing the plane to return to Portland International Airport. Credit: National Transportation Safety Board via AP

The Boeing jetliner that [suffered an inflight blowout](#) over Oregon was not being used for flights to Hawaii after a warning light that could have indicated a pressurization problem lit up on three different flights, a federal official said Sunday.

Alaska Airlines decided to restrict the aircraft from long flights over water so the plane "could return very quickly to an airport" if the warning light reappeared, said Jennifer Homendy, chair of the National Transportation Safety Board.

Homendy cautioned that the pressurization light might be [unrelated to Friday's incident](#) in which a plug covering an unused exit door blew off the Boeing 737 Max 9 as it cruised about three miles (4.8 kilometers) over Oregon.

The warning light came on during three previous flights: on Dec. 7, Jan. 3 and Jan. 4—the day before the door plug broke off. Homendy said she didn't have all the details regarding the Dec. 7 incident but specified the light came on during a [flight](#) on Jan. 3 and on Jan. 4 after the plane had landed.

The NTSB said the lost door plug was found Sunday near Portland, Oregon, by a school teacher—for now, known only as Bob—who discovered it in his backyard and sent two photos to the safety board. Investigators will examine the plug, which is 26 by 48 inches (66 by 121 centimeters) and weighs 63 pounds (28.5 kilograms), for signs of how it broke free.



This image from video provided by Elizabeth Le shows passengers near the damage on an Alaska Airlines Boeing 737 Max 9, Flight 1282, which was forced to return to Portland International Airport on Friday, Jan. 5, 2024. Credit: Elizabeth Le via AP

Investigators will not have the benefit of hearing what was going on in the cockpit during the flight. The [cockpit voice recorder](#)—one of two so-called black boxes—recorded over the flight's sounds after two hours, Homendy said.

At a news conference Sunday night, Homendy provided new details about the chaotic scene that unfolded on the plane. The explosive rush of air damaged several rows of seats and pulled insulation from the walls. The cockpit door flew open and banged into a lavatory door.

The force ripped the headset off the co-pilot and the captain lost part of her headset. A quick reference checklist kept within easy reach of the pilots flew out of the open cockpit, Homendy said.

The plane made it back to Portland, however, and none of the 171 passengers and six crew members was seriously injured.



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 Mitchelldyer

Hours after the incident, [the FAA ordered the grounding](#) of 171 of the

218 Max 9s in operation, including all those used by Alaska Airlines and United Airlines, until they can be inspected. The airlines were still waiting Sunday for details about how to do the inspections.

Alaska Airlines, which has 65 Max 9s, and United, with 79, are the only U.S. airlines to fly that particular model of Boeing's workhorse 737. United said it was waiting for Boeing to issue a "multi-operator message," which is a service bulletin used when multiple airlines need to perform similar work on a particular type of plane.

Boeing was working on the bulletin but had not yet submitted it to the FAA for review and approval, according to a person familiar with the situation. Producing a detailed, technical bulletin frequently takes a couple days, said the person, who spoke on condition of anonymity to describe a matter that the company and regulators have not publicly discussed.



Adam Pirkle stands with his bicycle on the edge of a densely thicketed area in the Cedar Hills area of southwest Portland, Ore., Sunday, Jan. 7, 2024. Pirkle said he rode 14 miles looking for the wreckage of the fuselage that detached from a Boeing 737 Max 9 shortly after the takeoff of an Alaska Airlines flight on Friday, Jan. 5. The National Transportation Safety Board estimated it may have fallen in the area. Credit: AP Photo/Claire Rush

Boeing declined to comment.

Without some of their planes, cancellations began to mount at the two carriers. Alaska Airlines said it canceled 170 flights—more than one-fifth of its schedule—by mid-afternoon on the West Coast because of the groundings, while United had scrapped about 180 flights while salvaging others by finding different planes.

Democratic U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell of Washington, chair of the Senate's Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, said she agreed with the decision to ground the Max 9s.

"Aviation production has to meet a gold standard, including quality control inspections and strong FAA oversight," she said in a statement.

Before the discovery of the missing plug, the NTSB had pleaded with residents in an area west of Portland called Cedar Hills to be on the lookout for the object.



In southwest Portland, Ore., Gavin Redshaw shows the drone he used on Sunday, Jan. 7, 2024, to search for the wreckage of the fuselage of a Boeing 737 Max 9 that detached during an Alaska Airlines flight on Friday, Jan. 5. The National Transportation Safety Board estimated the fuselage may have fallen in the area.

Credit: AP Photo/Claire Rush

On Sunday, people scoured dense thickets wedged between busy roads and a light rail train station. Adam Pirkle said he rode 14 miles (22 kilometers) through the overgrowth on his bicycle.

"I've been looking at the flight track, I was looking at the winds," he said. "I've been trying to focus on wooded areas."

Before the [school teacher](#) named Bob found the missing door plug, searchers located two cell phones that appeared to have belonged to passengers on Friday's terrifying flight. One was discovered in a yard, the other on the side of a road. Both were turned over to the NTSB, which vowed to return them to their owners.

Alaska Airlines flight 1282 took off from Portland at 5:07 p.m. Friday for a two-hour trip to Ontario, California. About six minutes later, the chunk of fuselage blew out as the plane was climbing at about 16,000 feet (4.8 kilometers).



A sprawling hospital complex in the Cedar Hills neighborhood of southwest Portland, Ore., is seen from a patch of densely thicketed land across from it, Sunday, Jan. 7, 2024. The National Transportation Safety Board estimated that the fuselage of a Boeing 737 Max 9 that detached from an Alaska Airlines flight on Friday, Jan. 5, may have landed in the area. Credit: AP Photo/Claire Rush

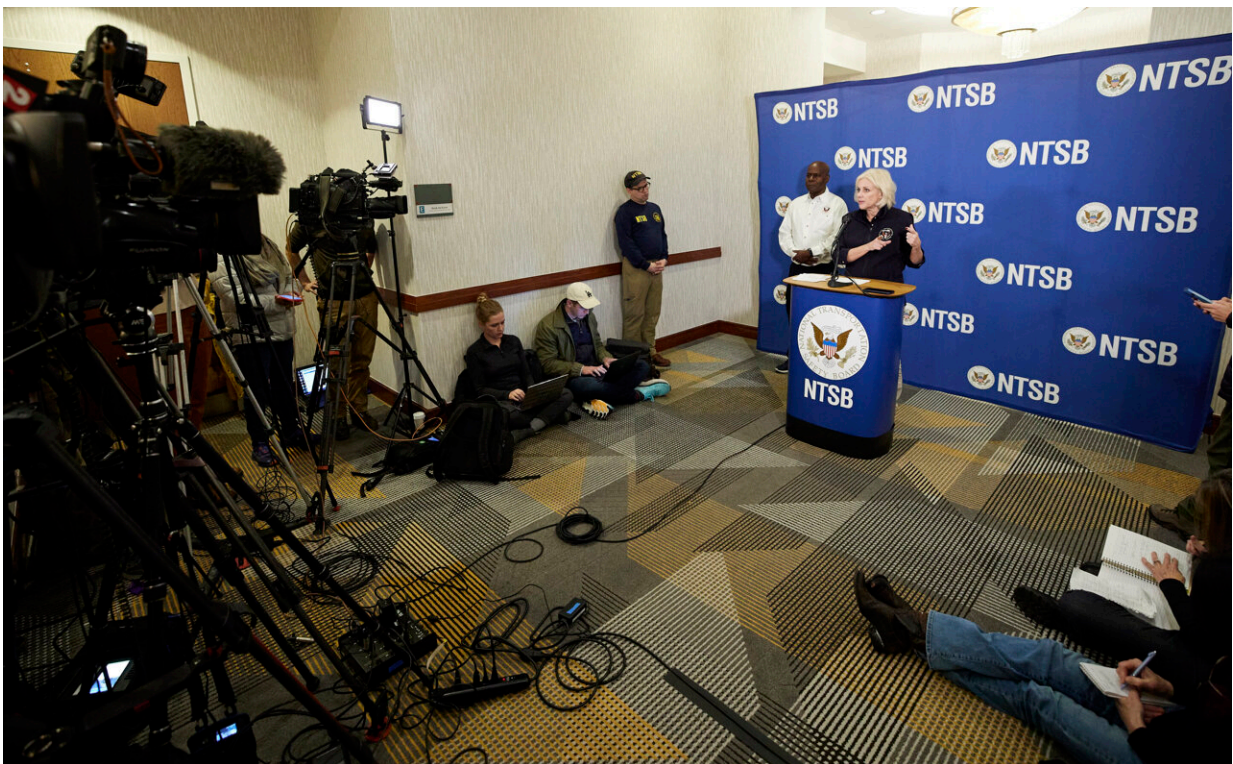
One of the pilots [declared an emergency](#) and asked for clearance to descend to 10,000 feet (3 kilometers), where the air would be rich enough for passengers to breathe without oxygen masks.

Videos posted online by passengers showed a gaping hole where the paneled-over door had been. They applauded when the plane landed safely about 13 minutes after the blowout. Firefighters came down the aisle, asking passengers to remain in their seats as they treated the

injured.

It was extremely lucky that the airplane had not yet reached cruising altitude, when passengers and flight attendants might be walking around the cabin, Homendy said.

The aircraft involved rolled off the assembly line and received its certification two months ago, according to online FAA records. It had been on 145 flights since entering commercial service Nov. 11, said FlightRadar24, another tracking service. The flight from Portland was the aircraft's third of the day.



National Transportation Safety Board Chair Jennifer Homendy speaks to the media about the investigation on Alaska Airlines flight 1282 in Portland, Ore., Saturday, Jan. 6, 2024. Federal officials on Saturday ordered the immediate grounding of some Boeing 737 Max 9 jetliners until they are inspected after the

Alaska Airlines plane suffered a blowout that left a gaping hole in the side of the fuselage. Credit: AP Photo/Craig Mitchell/dyer



Stephanie Shinn from Kenmore waits three hours at this point while her husband waits in line to rebook their flight to Philadelphia after their flight on Alaska Airlines was canceled at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport on Saturday, Jan. 6, 2024, in SeaTac, Wash. Alaska Airlines canceled more than 100 flights after grounding Boeing's fleet of 65 Max 9s for inspections following Friday's emergency landing of a Boeing 737 Max 9 jetliner. Credit: Karen Ducey/The Seattle Times via AP



On a personal electronic GPS, Beaverton, Ore., resident Adam Pirkle shows the 14 miles he rode on his bicycle in his neighborhood and around southwest Portland, Ore., Sunday, Jan. 7, 2024, looking for the fuselage of a Boeing 737 Max 9 that detached shortly after the takeoff of an Alaska Airlines flight on Friday, Jan. 5. The National Transportation Safety Board estimated the fuselage may have fallen in the area. Credit: AP Photo/Claire Rush



A patch of land filled with dense, thorny thickets, sandwiched between busy roads and light rail train station, stands across from a sprawling hospital complex in the Cedar Hills neighborhood of southwest Portland, Ore., Sunday, Jan. 7, 2024. The National Transportation Safety Board estimated the fuselage of a Boeing 737 Max 9 that detached from an Alaska Airlines flight shortly after takeoff on Friday, Jan. 5, may have fallen in the area. Credit: AP Photo/Claire Rush



Road signs show the intersection of Barnes Road and Oregon Route 217 in Cedar Hills neighborhood of southwest Portland, Ore., just next to the suburb of Beaverton, Sunday, Jan. 7, 2024. The National Transportation Safety Board estimated that part of the fuselage of a Boeing 737 Max 9 that detached shortly after the takeoff of an Alaska Airlines flight on Friday, Jan. 5, may have fallen near the intersection. Credit: AP Photo/Claire Rush



National Transportation Safety Board Chair Jennifer Homendy speaks to the media about the investigation of Alaska Airlines flight 1282 in Portland, Ore., Saturday, Jan. 6, 2024. Federal officials on Saturday ordered the immediate grounding of some Boeing 737 Max 9 jetliners until they are inspected after the Alaska Airlines plane suffered a blowout that left a gaping hole in the side of the fuselage. Credit: AP Photo/Craig Mitchell/lyer



An Alaska Airlines Boeing 737-990ER flight 337 from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., lands at Portland International Airport in Portland, Ore., Saturday, Jan. 6, 2024. The FAA has ordered the temporary grounding of Boeing 737 MAX 9 aircraft after part of the fuselage blew out during a flight. Credit: AP Photo/Craig Mitchell Dyer



A Boeing 737 MAX 9 taxis past unpainted planes as it gets ready to takeoff for the aircraft's first flight, Thursday, April 13, 2017, in Renton, Wash. On Saturday, Jan. 6, 2024, U.S. officials ordered the immediate grounding of Boeing 737-9 Max jetliners after an Alaska Airlines plane suffered a blowout that left a gaping hole in the side of the fuselage. Credit: AP Photo/Ted S. Warren, File



Kelvin Lau, left, waits with his family, including daughter Chloe, 3, to rebook a canceled Alaska Airlines flight, Saturday, Jan. 6, 2024, in SeaTac, Wash. Alaska Airlines canceled more than 100 flights after grounding Boeing's fleet of 65 Max 9s for inspections following Friday's emergency landing of a Boeing 737 Max 9 jetliner. Credit: Karen Ducey/The Seattle Times via AP



Alaska Airlines flight 1276, a Boeing 737-900, taxis before takeoff from Portland International Airport in Portland, Ore., Saturday, Jan. 6, 2024. The FAA has ordered the temporary grounding of Boeing 737 MAX 9 aircraft after part of the fuselage blew out during a flight. Credit: AP Photo/Craig Mitchell/dyer



This photo released by the National Transportation Safety Board shows a gaping hole where the paneled-over door had been at the fuselage plug area of Alaska Airlines Flight 1282 on Sunday, Jan. 7, 2024, in Portland, Ore. A panel used to plug an area reserved for an exit door on the Boeing 737 Max 9 jetliner blew out Jan. 5, shortly after the flight took off from Portland, forcing the plane to return to Portland International Airport. Credit: National Transportation Safety Board via AP



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College students Fiona Max, left, and her twin sister Isabel Max check their phones while trying to rebook their flight back to school at Princeton after their Alaska Airlines flight was canceled at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport on Saturday, Jan. 6, 2024, in SeaTac, Wash. Alaska Airlines canceled more than 100 flights after grounding Boeing's fleet of 65 Max 9s for inspections following Friday's emergency landing of a Boeing 737 Max 9 jetliner. Credit: Karen Ducey/The Seattle Times via AP

The Max is the newest version of Boeing's venerable 737, a twin-engine, single-aisle plane frequently used on U.S. domestic [flights](#). The [plane](#) went into service in May 2017.

Two Max 8 jets crashed in 2018 and 2019, killing 346 people. All Max 8 and Max 9 planes were grounded worldwide for nearly two years until

Boeing made changes to an automated flight control system implicated in the crashes.

The Max has been plagued by other issues, including manufacturing flaws, concern about overheating that led FAA to tell pilots to [limit use](#) of an anti-ice system, and a possible [loose bolt](#) in the rudder system.

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