

US intensifies oversight of Boeing, will begin production audits after latest mishap for planemaker

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This image taken Sunday, Jan. 7, 2024, and released by the National Transportation Safety Board, shows a section of Alaska Airlines Flight 1282 that is missing panel on a Boeing 737-9 MAX in Portland, Ore. Federal officials are investigating Boeing's oversight of production of a panel that blew off a jetliner

in midflight last week. Credit: NTSB via AP

The Federal Aviation Administration says it will increase oversight of Boeing and audit production of the 737 Max 9 jetliner after a panel blew off an Alaska Airlines plane in midflight last week, the latest in a string of mishaps at the troubled aircraft maker.

The FAA said Friday that it would judge whether Boeing and its suppliers followed approved quality procedures.

The FAA also said it's reconsidering a longstanding practice of relying on employees at aircraft manufacturers to perform some safety analysis of planes. Members of Congress criticized the practice of deputizing Boeing employees as inspectors after two deadly crashes involving Boeing 737 Max 8 planes in 2018 and 2019.

"It is time to re-examine the delegation of authority and assess any associated safety risks," said new FAA Administrator Mike Whitaker. "The FAA is exploring the use of an independent third party to oversee Boeing's inspections and its quality system."

Whitaker suggested that FAA might find "a technical, nonprofit organization" to oversee help oversee Boeing's work.

The agency also said it will increase monitoring of problems reported on Max 9 flights.

In a statement, Arlington, Virginia-based Boeing said it will cooperate with the FAA. "We support all actions that strengthen quality and safety, and we are taking actions across our production system," the company said.

The FAA's intensifying focus on safety at Boeing comes just a day after it announced an [investigation into whether the manufacturer failed](#) to make sure a fuselage panel that blew off was safe and manufactured to meet the design that regulators approved.



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Whitaker told CNBC Friday that FAA will also step up its oversight of Spirit AeroSystems, which supplies Boeing with fuselages for the 737

Max.

"We know there are problems with manufacturing, there have been problems in the past, but these are continuing," Whitaker said. "This is a brand-new aircraft, it has just come off the line and it had significant problems, and we believe there are other manufacturing problems."

Spirit also said it's supporting the FAA actions. "Spirit's top priorities are quality, product integrity and compliance," a company statement said.

The FAA and National Transportation Safety Board are focusing their investigation [on plugs used to fill spots](#) for extra doors when those exits are not required for safety reasons on Boeing 737 Max 9 jetliners.

One of two door plugs on an Alaska Max 9 blew out shortly after the plane took off from Portland, Oregon, a week ago, leaving a hole in the plane. The cabin lost pressure and was forced descend rapidly and return to Portland for an emergency landing. No serious injuries were reported.

Former congressman Peter DeFazio, who chaired the House committee that investigated the Max crashes, said Friday that the FAA's actions are needed to rein in quality and safety problems at Boeing.

"This an extraordinary step by the administrator of the FAA, one that is long overdue," he said. "The possibility that Boeing will lose the (deputization of its employees) and be subject to independent third party oversight—and I would expect that will have to be paid for by Boeing—that would be a massive, unprecedented step to force the unwilling executives at Boeing to shape up the company."

After the panel blew off the plane, the FAA grounded all Max 9s equipped with the door plugs, forcing Alaska and United to cut flights. The aircraft remain grounded while the National Transportation Safety

Board and the FAA continue their investigation.



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Since then, the FAA was told of other problems on the Max 9. Alaska and United reported [finding loose bolts](#) on door plugs that they inspected in some of their other Max 9 jets.

NTSB investigators said this week they have not been able to find four

bolts that are used to help secure the 63-pound door plug. They are not sure whether the bolts were there before the plane took off.

On Thursday, the FAA asked Boeing to respond within 10 business days and tell the agency "the root cause" of the problem with the door plug and steps the company is taking to prevent a recurrence.

Earlier this week, Boeing CEO David Calhoun called the incident "a quality escape." He told employees that the company was "acknowledging our mistake ... and that this event can never happen again."

The door plugs are installed by Spirit, but investigators have not said which company's employees last worked on the plug on the Alaska plane that suffered the blowout.

The day after the blowout, the FAA grounded all 65 Max 9s operated by Alaska and 79 used by United Airlines, until Boeing develops inspection guidelines and planes can be examined. Alaska [canceled all flights](#) by Max 9s through Saturday.

The incident on the Alaska plane is the latest in a string of mishaps for Boeing that began in 2018, with the first of two crashes of Max 8 planes in Indonesia and Ethiopia—and more than four months apart—that killed a total of 346 people.

Max 8 and Max 9 planes were grounded worldwide for nearly two years after the second crash. Since then, various manufacturing flaws have at times held up deliveries of Max jets and a larger Boeing plane, the 787. Last month, the company asked airlines to [inspect their Max jets](#) for a loose bolt in the rudder-control system.

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