

Boeing's problems rattle US aviation regulator as well

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This Boeing 737 MAX 9 airplane of Alaska Airlines lost a side panel during a flight on January 5, 2024.

The US Federal Aviation Administration, sharply criticized after the crashes of two Boeing planes in 2018 and 2019, is again being dragged

into a maelstrom surrounding the major American aerospace manufacturer.

The dramatic mid-flight blowout on January 5 of a fuselage panel on an Alaska Airlines plane precipitated the departures of a series of top Boeing officials—including CEO Dave Calhoun, who is set to step down at year's end—and the reduced production of the 737 MAX.

But as Boeing faces multiple inquiries and audits in the United States and abroad, it has repeatedly assured critics that it is working "with full transparency and under the oversight" of FAA regulators.

And the FAA, which itself has seen four bosses come and go since August 2019, has been unable to evade a share of the responsibility.

"The FAA has to be held accountable as well," said Senator Richard Blumenthal, who heads a subcommittee investigating Boeing's safety practices.

After the panel incident in January, the agency dispatched a team to inspect Boeing factories, and gave the firm 90 days to provide an "action plan" to address several problem areas.

Self-reporting

"I think the FAA is doing the best that they can and that they have greatly improved their surveillance of Boeing" since the 2018 and 2019 crashes off Indonesia and in Ethiopia, which killed 346 people, said Jeff Guzzetti, an aviation consultant and former head of the agency's investigation division.



Whistleblowers take an oath before testifying to a US Senate committee investigating Boeing safety practices, on April 17, 2024.

"But they did fail to catch production problems," he said, noting that for decades the FAA relied on manufacturers themselves to "self-report problems."

The FAA, short on money and personnel, has long delegated the job of quality assurance to pre-approved employees of the airplane manufacturers.

That creates "a conflict of interest," said Hassan Shahidi, president of the nonprofit Flight Safety Foundation.

"There needs to be a shift where the FAA has more direct responsibility for oversight," he said.

Like Guzzetti, he said he has seen some improvement but believes the FAA must dispatch more of its own inspectors—and not delegate so much regulatory authority to manufacturers.

"This is going to take some time and it will need vigilance," Shahidi added.

But the agency "is on the right track now," said Richard Aboulafia, managing director of the AeroDynamic Advisory consultancy.

"It's nothing that can't be corrected with additional oversight and resources," he said.



FAA administrator Mike Whitaker speaks in Washington on March 11, 2024.

'Record' funding

Those resources depend directly on the US Congress, and the Senate on Thursday approved a "record" amount of agency funding for the next five years.

"We need to show (the public) that we are asking for, implementing and holding accountable the FAA to a gold standard for safety," said Senator Maria Cantwell, who chairs the Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee.

The "record" level of financing, Cantwell added, would allow the FAA to step up inspections.

It still needs House approval before President Joe Biden can sign it into law.

Industry shortages of qualified personnel, from mechanics to engineers, were made worse by the pandemic, affecting every stage of manufacturing—from supply procurement to production and maintenance.

"It's difficult to recruit and retain good craftsmen, even for Boeing," Guzzetti said.



Families of victims of the March 10, 2019, crash of a Boeing 737 MAX airplane in Ethiopia hold up photos of the dead during a protest in Arlington, Virginia.

And the FAA has specifically struggled to fill its hiring needs because workers can find higher pay and better benefits in the private sector.

Investigations into the 2018 and 2019 Boeing crashes showed that the company knowingly concealed from the FAA problems in a software system linked to the accidents, whistleblower Joe Jacobsen told Blumenthal's committee in mid-April.

Jacobsen, who worked for the FAA for 25 years after 11 years with Boeing, said the agency had become "too captive to Boeing."

The FAA falls under the US Transportation Department, whose [inspector general](#) in June 2022 opened an audit into the agency's supervision of 737 and 787 production. A final report is expected this summer.

The inspector general's office already concluded in 2021 that "weaknesses in FAA's certification and delegation processes hindered its oversight of the 737 MAX 8."

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