

Alaska Airlines faces possible shutdown over lax maintenance of jets

Joseph Tanniru
7 June 2000

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has threatened action against Alaska Airlines—the tenth largest air carrier in the United States—after an audit of the company's records showed significant problems with the West Coast airline's heavy maintenance program. Alaska Airlines has been given seven days to outline a plan for rectifying these errors.

If the plan is not deemed sufficient, the FAA could prohibit the airline from completing regularly required repairs on its aircraft, and a maintenance shutdown could begin after 30 days. This action would effectively shut down the airline over a period of months, since the planes must be grounded if the maintenance is not carried out. John Kelley, the airline's chairman, downplayed the FAA's pronouncement, saying they had already begun making the recommended changes.

Inspectors from the FAA found two Alaska Airlines jets had been improperly returned to passenger service after major maintenance. The audit also found lapses in record keeping, management and procedures in the repair and maintenance of its 89 aircraft. Nick Lacey, FAA head, commented: "We have serious concerns about critical processes, including management effectiveness." The audit found that there were 150 cases in which documents for heavy maintenance work could not be found, though the report also contends that in all cases the repairs were actually completed.

The concerns over the maintenance procedures at Alaska were provoked after the January 31 crash of Flight 261 off the southern California coast, which killed all 88 people on board. It has been determined that the crash was the result of the mechanical failure of a jackscrew and nut assembly that controlled the horizontal stabilizer on the Boeing MD-83.

The maintenance history of the very plane involved in the crash suggests more fundamental problems with the

safety procedures of Alaska Airlines. A test of the part in 1997 found that the threads of the screw had deteriorated .040 inches, the limit of acceptable wear. Mechanics recommended that the part be replaced, but instead a re-examination of the part was requested from above, which found that the deterioration was in fact only .033 inches. A deterioration of .034 inches would have required that the part be rechecked every 1,000 flight-hours—meaning it would have been rechecked before the fatal crash of January 2000.

A criminal investigation of the company conducted by the FBI and the Department of Transportation has focused on the 1997 test. Indeed, Alaska Airlines has been under criminal investigation for deliberately falsifying maintenance records—not simply making "errors"—since December 1998. The airline has been accused of falsely certifying repair work that was never completed.

In March, 64 Alaska mechanics claimed that they had been "pressured, threatened and intimidated" by their superiors to cut corners on repairs. John Young, an Alaska air mechanic, said that "the pressure is constant and ongoing to skimp on maintenance and to not replace critical parts."

Also in March, two Alaska pilots failed to perform a routine procedure, leaving passengers without emergency oxygen. The pilots, who continued with the flight, have since been fired. However the incident has raised questions about the airline's training programs. Eighty percent of the required annual pilot re-education sessions were found to have been conducted during the one-month grace period, that is, at the very last legal opportunity.

The FAA claims that none of the violations directly threatened safety on a flight. Nick Lacey commented: "Aviation accidents comes as a result of a series of

small errors and an inability to detect small errors." However, the FAA failed to catch any of the airlines "errors" before the crash of Flight 261 and has come under attack for its lax procedures in regulating air safety. According to Michael Barr, director of the aviation safety program at the University of Southern California, "The FAA is under great pressure right now, as all these things are coming out of Alaska since the accident."

One thing can be certain: neither the federal criminal investigation nor the FAA ruling will seriously address the safety problems created by an airline market characterized by fierce competition for profit, as all airlines cut back on maintenance in order to reduce overhead costs.



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