

US: Hundreds of aging American Airlines planes grounded for inspection

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On Wednesday, American Airlines grounded 10 percent of its planes and cancelled flights in response to a hastily issued directive from the Federal Aviation Administration that required the company—the world’s largest airline—to inspect for possible wiring dangers.

The order comes just one day after a separate directive ordering inspections on thousands of Boeing jetliners potentially at risk for fuel leaks, and only weeks after an abrupt grounding of dozens of planes operated by Southwest Airlines for inspections. All of these moves highlight the dangerously crumbling infrastructure of the airline industry and the compromised state of federal oversight.

American Airlines announced the cancellations Wednesday morning of approximately 200 flights, all involving large MD-80 jets. Each craft holds some 170 passengers, meaning that travel was interrupted for tens of thousands of people across the country.

American Airlines uses 300 MD-80 planes, which are on average 18 years old. The oldest MD-80 still used began flying for the company in 1983.

According to a report in the *Dallas Morning News* Wednesday, these are not even the oldest craft in the fleet. AA also operates a fleet of Boeing 767-200s that are on average 21 years old, as well as 18-year-old Airbus A300s.

The machinery of the entire airline industry is worryingly old. The *Morning News* noted that American Airlines operates the second-oldest fleet among the top US carriers, behind Northwest Airlines. In a cost-cutting restructuring scheme in the 1990s, Northwest expanded its fleet of Douglas DC-9 planes, which are on average 35 years old.

The decision to continue using aging aircraft is based solely on profit. The *Morning News* quoted a January statement by AA chief executive Gerard Arpey, who

said that the company would wait until it was cost effective to replace the MD-80s with more fuel efficient planes. “We continue to be a little bit discouraged by the timing of the next-generation narrow-body airplane,” Arpey said, “which will probably push us in the direction of more 737-800s for MD-80 replacement than the next-generation airplane. But you’ll have to stay tuned on that.” At present, industry analysts project new narrow-body models will not come into production until 2017 to 2020.

The MD-80s were being inspected Wednesday for wire shielding problems, although both corporate and FAA officials have emphasized that the grounding was voluntary and precautionary.

According to FAA spokesperson Tim Wagner, planes are being checked to verify that shielding over a wire bundle attached to an auxiliary hydraulic pump is attached to an inner wall at one-inch intervals. This is an airworthiness standard that was issued two years ago, although the FAA did not begin auditing for company compliance until this month.

Wagner told Bloomberg news, “We have found that some of the attachments were slightly more than one inch ... we are going back to make sure we have precisely attached the sleeve every single inch. This is an abundance of caution on our part.”

In other words, sleeves that are supposed to cover bundles of wires were found detached from the wall of the wheel wells on an unspecified of the planes inspected Wednesday.

According to MSNBC Wednesday, American Airlines was rushing to get every inspection completed “over the course of a few hours.”

The FAA itself came under scrutiny by a congressional committee in early March for allowing Southwest Airlines to fly at least 117 planes overdue

for inspections. In 2006 and 2007, Southwest carried out nearly 60,000 flights using 46 planes not inspected for metal fatigue-related cracks in their fuselages, with the full knowledge of the company and complicity of FAA inspectors.

McClatchy newspapers reported March 23 that Southwest inspected dozens of planes this month and found cracks in the fuselages of six aircraft. A company spokesperson told the news service that “at no point was it an issue of safety for passengers.”

According to two FAA whistleblowers scheduled to testify before the House Transportation Committee next month, the agency allowed Southwest to skip inspections for years. Officials in the agency were reportedly close to upper management in the company, with one top Southwest maintenance official having previously held a position in the FAA. Government documents obtained by *USA Today* indicate that FAA officials ignored critical safety violations by Southwest. The paper reported March 12 that top officials also “leaked sensitive data to the carrier and tried to intimidate two inspectors to head off investigations.”

In an effort to strike a tougher pose, the FAA announced it would seek \$10.2 million in fines from Southwest for the violation and has issued a series of hasty inspection directives to the airline industry in the weeks since.

On Tuesday, FAA officials announced mandatory inspections on 3,500 Boeing 737s for a long outstanding danger of fuel leakage. In August, a China Airlines 737 exploded in flames on the tarmac of an Okinawa, Japan airport, just after 165 passengers were evacuated. The blaze was caused by a bolt that rattled free from the wing and pierced the fuel tank. Several other reports of similar incidences had been filed with the FAA prior to this week’s directive.

The FAA also issued a directive enforcing inspections on 5,000 other US-operated planes and 1,000 others internationally—again, on long-known dangers of engine failure associated with faulty gaskets in propeller planes.

The directives speak less to a policy of regulation than to its prolonged absence. Years’ worth of job cuts, along with wholesale cuts to employee wages, maintenance, and equipment upkeep, have dangerously compromised airline safety—with the active cooperation of federal authorities and the leadership of the

industry’s unions.

Last fall, NASA withheld a compendium of airline safety data—including interviews with 24,000 pilots, data on the prevalence of near mid-air collisions, landing problems, mechanical failures, and other incidences—on the grounds that it would threaten the airline business because of the devastating effect it would have on consumer confidence.

NASA’s stonewalling provided yet another illustration of the ways in which government agencies act on behalf of private enterprise and subordinate public safety to business interests. Associated Press journalist Rita Beamish, whose Freedom of Information Act requests to obtain the information were thwarted, said a source familiar with the data indicated that at least twice as many dangerous incidents occurred as were recorded by current monitoring systems.

After several months of pressure from consumer protection groups and the media, NASA released the data in what the *New York Times* described as “an intentionally scrambled, partly deleted version” (“NASA Offers Airline Safety Data,” January 1, 2008). The data was presented “in a format that made it difficult if not impossible for outsiders to analyze in search of trends, presenting the reports as documents rather than spreadsheets,” the *Times* noted.

Upon publication, NASA administrator Michael Griffin snidely told reporters, “It’s hard for me to see any data here that the traveling public would care about or ought to care about,” he said. “But it’s also not for me to prescribe what others may care about. We were asked to release the data and I said that we would, and I’ve done that.”



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