American Airlines cancels hundreds more flights

Naomi Spencer
12 April 2008

On Friday American Airlines, the largest commercial air carrier in the US, canceled some 600 flights as wiring inspections continue on the company's fleet of decades-old MD-80 planes. So far this week over 3,000 flights have been canceled, stranding well over a quarter of a million people at airports. The inspections are expected to continue through at least Saturday night.

The chaos is the result of a hastily issued directive by the Federal Aviation Administration to enforce compliance with long-standing airworthiness standards. The directive came in the midst of a scandal over collusion between the FAA and Southwest Airlines to evade vital safety inspections.

American Airlines grounded its fleet of 300 MD-80s last month to conduct overdue inspections of wiring. However, a subsequent FAA review of the company-inspected planes turned up problems with wiring and shielding in 15 of 19 crafts.

On April 9, American Airlines vice president Dan Garton told reporters during a press conference that the planes had failed FAA review because the company's mechanics "took what I would call certain latitudes in accomplishing [the directive]."

The airline has also strenuously sought to portray the wiring matter as one of technical compliance rather than safety. Yet FAA spokesperson Les Dorr explained to reporters Thursday, "The safety issue is that if the wires in the bundle were to rub against each other, or against the aircraft, they could be worn to the point where a spark could occur," Dorr said. "That could cause a fire, and in a worst-case scenario, it could cause a fuel explosion."

The wiring concern was first raised by Boeing, the manufacturer of the MD-80s, in 2003, and the relevant airworthiness directive was issued shortly afterward. Companies were expected to comply within 18 months of the directive's issuance.

The re-inspections and repairs—undertaken by American on an emergency, last-minute basis, a full five years after the directive was issued—underscore the breakdown of federal oversight. In particular, even while striking a more stringent pose toward airline safety, the FAA continues to rely on company inspections. Moreover, no penalties have been proposed against American Airlines for its violation of airworthiness directives.

On April 10, the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee heard testimony from officials at the FAA and the Department of Transportation on the relations between the regulatory agency and the airline industry. The Senate hearing follows last week's House investigative hearings into the safety lapses at Southwest that allowed dozens of uninspected planes, many with dangerous structural damage, to fly for years.

DOT Inspector General Calvin Scovel delivered some of the more critical testimony Thursday, stating that the FAA "relies too heavily on self-disclosures and promotes a pattern of excessive leniency at the expense of effective oversight and appropriate enforcement."

Scovel said that the FAA's Irving, Texas field office, which oversees Southwest, had "an overly collaborative relationship with the air carrier that allowed repeated self-disclosures of AD [airworthiness directives] violations through FAA's partnership program." This arrangement allowed the airline to "repeatedly self-disclose AD violations without ensuring that SWA had developed a comprehensive solution for reported safety problems," while at the same time avoiding any penalties whatsoever.

Scovel also noted that Southwest had been allowed to evade FAA planned inspections for several years, but an industry-wide review of inspection lapses was not undertaken until after agency whistle-blower complaints were made public. The FAA had not reviewed Southwest's compliance record since 1999, Scovel testified.

In March 2007, Scovel said, "21 key inspections had not been completed in at least five years. As of March 25, 2008, FAA still had not completed five of these required inspections; in some cases inspections had not been completed in nearly eight years." In 2005, the inspector general's office found that FAA inspectors did not complete 26 percent of planned inspections.

His criticisms notwithstanding, the inspector general made no recommendations that would substantially strengthen the authority of the FAA, let alone alter the present "collaborative" relationship of the agency to airlines, which the FAA refers to as its "customers."

Instead, Scovel essentially recommended programs the FAA has already pledged to implement. Above all, he stressed "implementing a process for second level supervisory review of self-disclosures before they are accepted and closed—acceptance should not rest solely with one inspector."

Scovel also recommended "periodically rotating supervisory inspectors," requiring a "cooling-off" period between working for the FAA and accepting a position with an air carrier, and establishing a review team to track field office inspections.

As with testimony from agency officials in previous congressional appearances, the FAA's associate administrator for safety, Nicholas Sabatini, maintained that the problems at Southwest were a fluke, and pointed to the recent string of audits including those affecting American Airlines as proof that the airline industry was safer than ever. Sabatini insisted to the Senate that the FAA's recent directives found "99 percent compliance" in the industry. He added, "but it's the other 1 percent that keeps me up at night."