

Federal Aviation Administration accused of colluding with Boeing in wake of 737 crashes

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Flight recorders from Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302, which tragically crashed less than seven minutes after takeoff, were sent to France on Thursday. The aircraft, a Boeing 737 MAX 8, went down on Sunday, March 10, killing all 157 passengers and crew members on board.

The decision to send the recorders to France was seen as a rebuke to the United States, whose Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is facing accusations of ignoring safety issues with the 737. The FAA took the late step of grounding the planes on Wednesday after repeatedly assuring the public that they were safe to fly. This in spite of the fact that Sunday's crash was very similar to the crash of Lion Air Flight 610, also a Boeing 737 Max 8, in Indonesia last October.

Boeing stated that it fully supports grounding the planes as a precautionary step. However, the company reiterated its "full confidence" in the plane's safety. In this, the company has the full support of the Trump administration, which went out of its way to praise the company after grounding all Max 8 flights on Wednesday. The US grounding followed announcements by Aviation authorities in the United Kingdom, Germany, France, China, Australia and nearly 40 countries in total that the plane could neither take off nor fly over their respective airspaces.

The FAA, for its part, continuously refused to raise any safety concerns over the aircraft. As recently as Tuesday, acting FAA administrator Daniel Elwell said that the agency's review of the Max 8, "show[ed] no systemic performance issues and provides no basis to order grounding the aircraft." Elwell said that the agency will take "immediate and appropriate action" in the event that "any issues affecting the continued airworthiness of the aircraft are identified."

Bill McGee, aviation adviser for Consumer Reports,

recently noted the increasingly cozy relationship between the agency, tasked with air travel safety for hundreds of millions flying over US airspace and the companies they are supposed to regulate. "They [the airlines and the FAA] have not presented any evidence that the problems we've seen with these two crashes are not problems that could potentially exist here in the US," he told the Associated Press.

"Increasingly, the FAA is relying more and more on what the industry calls electronic surveillance," McGee added. "Not going out and kicking the tires, seeing the work being done, making sure it's done properly."

Calls have been made on Capitol Hill to at least put some pressure on the FAA for its failure to acknowledge the safety defects of the Max 8. "My fear is that the FAA is simply trying to save face and avoid acknowledging the safety defect that they failed to find when they certified the plane's safety," said Democratic Senator Richard Blumenthal, a member of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation.

Both of the major US carriers flying the 737, Southwest and American Airlines, also expressed confidence in the Max 8 this week despite the Ethiopian and Indonesian crashes. Southwest, which flies 34 of the planes, stated, "We remain confident in the safety and airworthiness of the Max 8." American, while saying that it would monitor the Ethiopian Airlines crash investigation, stated that it too had "full confidence in the aircraft and our crew members."

The plane's problems are thought to be linked to faulty software causing the plane's nose to tilt suddenly. US pilots of the Max 8 have stated that their planes' noses tilted downward suddenly after the autopilot feature was engaged. The pilots were then only able to wrest control of the aircraft after

disconnecting the autopilot.

Issues have also been reported with an anti-stall feature on the plane that also adjusts the position of the plane's nose if it believes the engines are stalling. This is believed to be the cause of the October Lion Air crash wherein the anti-stall feature operated erroneously, causing the plane to lose altitude and crash. The anti-stall feature, known as MCAS, only operates when auto-pilot is turned off, compounding the serious safety issues of the Max 8.

Many of the pilot reports regarding the Max 8 were compiled in a NASA database, which does not publicly reveal the pilots' names, or the particular airlines involved.

One of these reports details the conversation between a panicked pilot and copilot who lost control of their Max 8 aircraft, which began descending after the auto-pilot feature was turned on. The captain in question wrote in his report, "With the concerns with the Max 8 nose down stuff, we both [pilot and copilot] though it appropriate to bring it to your attention. Best guess from me is airspeed fluctuation." The pilot went on to relate that the fluctuations may have been due to an errant weather system overwhelming the plane's automation.

Another pilot recorded in the NASA database stated that his MAX 8's nose pitched downward within seconds of engaging autopilot. The plane began descending at 1,200 to 1,500 feet per minute. After the plane's low altitude warning system issued an audio warning, the auto pilot was disconnected, and the plane began to climb again.

The pilots in that case couldn't "think of any reason the aircraft would pitch nose down so aggressively."

Other pilots noted that Boeing has provided little to no training or information regarding the new features of the Max 8 and possible safety issues. "I am left to wonder," one pilot noted, "what else don't I know? The flight manual is inadequate and almost criminally insufficient."

The Airline Pilots Association union has been entirely dismissive of the pilots' complaints and effectively issued a gag order on its members this week after the crash in Ethiopia. In a press statement, the union wrote, "It is imperative that pilots refrain from interacting with the media and adding to the sensationalism surrounding these incidents."



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