

Boeing, reversing its stance, recommends simulator training for 737 Max 8 pilots

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In an about-face of its previous stance regarding simulator training for pilots flying its 737 Max aircraft, airplane manufacturer Boeing released a statement Tuesday calling for “simulator training in addition to computer-based training for all Max pilots prior to return to service of the 737 Max.” The statement includes the company’s pro forma claim of an “unstinting commitment to the safe return to service” of the grounded plane, following two crashes that killed a combined total of 346 men, women and children.

Since the October 2018 crash of Lion Air Flight 610, which plunged into the Java Sea minutes after takeoff from Jakarta, and the March 2019 crash of Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 just minutes after taking off from Addis Ababa, a mass of evidence has emerged pointing to criminal negligence, deadly safety short cuts and concealment of known dangers on the part of Boeing management, facilitated by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Yet not a single company or regulatory official has been criminally charged, let alone prosecuted and convicted.

Tuesday’s press release begs the question: Why weren’t pilots trained using flight simulators in the first place? It should become an exhibit in a murder trial for the top officials who oversaw the design, production and certification of the deadly aircraft.

The Max 8 will forever remain one of the most notorious planes ever to fly. After the first crash, in October 2018, Boeing, backed by the FAA, insisted that the plane was safe. Even after the second crash just five months later, Boeing and the FAA continued to claim that the aircraft was safe and refused to ground it until every other international aviation regulatory agency had done so.

As has now been proven, the crashes were caused by a piece of software known as the Maneuvering

Characteristics Augmentation System (MCAS). It was installed by Boeing to compensate for the Max 8’s tendency to stall, a byproduct of attaching a newer, larger engine onto the half-century-old Boeing 737 chassis.

The final report of the National Transportation Safety Committee of Indonesia regarding Lion Air Flight 610 explicitly notes that the aerospace giant used an old airframe in order to save time and money developing a new model that did not have “significant areas of change at the product level,” and used MCAS to ensure that there would not be “a simulator training requirement for pilots.”

It was in the immediate aftermath of the second crash that the training requirements to fly the Max 8, or the lack thereof, came to light. Boeing claimed that because the 737 Max 8 was so similar to its predecessor, the 737-NG, pilots would be able to fly the plane after working through a single 56-minute course on an iPad and a 13-page manual.

This was part of a scheme by Boeing to reduce the cost of the new plane for airlines, particularly those in poorer countries like Indonesia and Ethiopia, and minimize the time needed to get into the air. The “training” was one of many corners cut in order to beat back Boeing’s European-based rival Airbus, whose new A320neo jet was threatening to capture lucrative markets long dominated by the US giant, as well as the rapidly growing Asian market.

At the time, the company, the FAA and the pilots’ unions all agreed that the minimal training was adequate.

After the crashes, Boeing explicitly rejected calls for additional pilot training, even as the unions and the FAA backtracked. For the past 15 months, Boeing’s proposals to US regulators for putting the Max 8 back

into service have not included any flight simulator time, despite the fact that pilot certification for a commercial plane typically requires hundreds of hours of training, both in simulators and actual flights.

Now, however, Boeing's executives and large shareholders are feverishly engaged in damage control in an attempt to extract themselves from their current quagmire. The grounding has so far cost the company an estimated \$9 billion, which includes claims by the victims' families, suits by pilots and airlines for lost pay and business, the production freeze of the Max 8, and the labor involved in attempting to fix the plane. Airlines have removed the Max 8 from their schedules until April at the earliest, with some removing it until June. When polled, the vast majority of people have said they would not fly on the Max 8 until at least six months after it was put back into service, if ever.

Tuesday's statement is the latest in a series of shakeups and public relations moves by the company, the most significant of which was the ouster of Dennis Muilenburg as CEO last month. Muilenburg had headed the company since 2015 and overseen a surge in profits and share value on the basis of ruthless cost- and job-cutting. Boeing's top legal advisor, Michael Luttig, was also forced out.

The changes are cosmetic at best, despite a recent proclamation by interim Boeing CEO Greg Smith that "Safety is Boeing's top priority," parroting a phrase his predecessor had mouthed many times.

A report published Sunday by the *New York Times* reveals that recent internal audits by Boeing of its 737 Max 8 aircraft reveal three new problems with the plane: its internal wiring, its engines and its vulnerability to lightning strikes.

The first problem involves two wire bundles whose proximity risks short-circuiting, which would cause pilots to lose control of the plane and crash, similar to what happened to the pilots of the two doomed flights. Rather than make what Boeing has claimed would be a simple fix, the company has prevaricated, saying it wants to do "appropriate analysis" to see if the jet's other electronics prevent such an event from leading to a crash. In other words, a known and potentially fatal flaw may remain in the aircraft even after it is "fixed."

The second problem is a weakness in one of the rotors of the Max 8's engines, which could break the entire engine if it shattered. CFM International, the

company under General Electric and Safran that manufactures the Max 8's engines, discovered and reported the issue to the FAA. The agency, however, is not requiring an immediate fix, claiming that the chance of failure is remote—a second known and potentially fatal flaw that will likely remain in the Max 8 after it is "fixed."

The only newly discovered problem that ostensibly will be resolved is the vulnerability of the engines to lightning strikes. The reason, as noted above, that the Max 8 is at risk of stalling is that Boeing decided to attach new, more fuel-efficient and bigger engines to the 737 chassis. To fit the engines to the wings, they had to be ground down. As a result, the coating that insulates the fuel tank and fuel lines from lightning strikes was removed. It was only sheer luck that a lightning strike didn't explode one or more of these planes while they were still in the air.



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