

Alaska Airlines CEO says many of the carrier's Boeing 737 MAX 9 planes have loose bolts

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On Tuesday, the CEO of Alaska Airlines said inspections of its fleet of Boeing 737 MAX 9 jets had revealed loose bolts on “many” of the planes. Revelations of widespread safety defects have deepened the crisis of the \$135 billion global aircraft manufacturer.

In an interview with NBC News, Alaska Airlines CEO Ben Minicucci discussed the results of inspections by the carrier after a midair blowout of a door plug on a Boeing 737 MAX 9 flying from Portland, Oregon, to Ontario, California, on January 5.

Although no one was seriously injured on the flight, which had 177 people on board, and the crew was able to make an emergency landing, the exposure of major manufacturing problems at Boeing raises serious questions about the safety of the airline industry as a whole.

In 2018 and 2019, two Boeing 737 MAX 8 jets, one departing from Indonesia and the other from Ethiopia, crashed and killed a total of 346 people. Investigations into these catastrophic events showed that an autopilot system on the Boeing planes malfunctioned and forced them into unrecoverable nosedives.

United Airlines had previously reported that it found loose bolts on the panels that plug unused doorways in the fuselage of its Boeing 737 MAX 9 planes. Some airline experts have suggested that four bolts that are designed to hold the plug in place were never installed in the first place.

The National Transportation Safety Administration (NTSB) is still investigating the Alaska Airlines incident and has yet to report on its cause. The door plug was found in the backyard of a resident in the Portland area, where it landed after falling from the

sky.

In his interview with NBC News, CEO Minicucci said he had “very tough and candid conversations” with Boeing, and he is “more than frustrated and disappointed.” He continued: “I am angry. This happened to Alaska Airlines. It happened to our guests and happened to our people. And—my demand on Boeing is what are they going to do to improve their quality programs in-house.”

Minicucci, who has been a leading executive of Alaska Airlines since 2016, also said there “was no question in my mind” that the door plug blowout problem had its source in Boeing’s manufacturing process.

While the onus is on Boeing to show how it will improve its quality control, he said, “We’re sending our audit people to audit their quality control systems and processes to make sure that every aircraft that comes off that production line” has the highest levels of excellence.

Minicucci told NBC News that Alaska Airlines, which has the largest percentage of Boeing 737 Max 9 planes of any major carrier, had been planning to buy 10 more of the jets. He said the company will now evaluate “what the best long-term strategic plan is for Alaska[’s] fleet mix,” once the craft is certified.

Indicating that the airline might consider purchasing planes from Boeing’s competitor, Airbus, the Alaska Airline CEO said, “I think everything’s open at this point ... for us.”

Responding to Minicucci’s comments, Boeing released a statement to NBC that said the number one US commercial aircraft manufacturer had “let down our airline customers” and was “deeply sorry for the

significant disruption.” The company said it was taking action to bring the 737 MAX 9 planes “safely back to service and to improve our quality and delivery performance.”

On Wednesday, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said it would not allow Boeing to expand production of the 737 MAX following the January 5 door plug blowout incident. A statement from FAA Administrator Mike Whitaker said:

We will not agree to any request from Boeing for an expansion in production or approve additional production lines for the 737 MAX until we are satisfied that the quality control issues uncovered during this process are resolved.

The FAA will, however, allow the MAX 9 planes to return to service after inspections of the planes are completed.

Also on Wednesday, Boeing CEO Dave Calhoun met with several lawmakers in Washington D.C. for closed-door conversations. Two senators said that Calhoun provided no answers as to the cause of the door plug blowout.

After the meeting, Senator Maria Cantwell, Democrat from Washington State and ranking member of the Senate Commerce Committee, said the session was held at Boeing’s request, and added, “The American flying public and Boeing line workers deserve a culture of leadership at Boeing that puts safety ahead of profits.”

Cantwell is a recipient of campaign contributions from Boeing, and the company’s primary Everett manufacturing facilities, which employ 30,000 people, are located 25 miles north of downtown Seattle. Cantwell said that the Senate Commerce Committee will hold public hearings on the crisis stemming from the door plug blowout at which Calhoun will testify in the near future.



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