

Passenger flights resume on Boeing 737 Max 9 planes three weeks after midair door plug blowout

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Alaska Airlines resumed commercial flights on Boeing 737 Max 9 jets on Friday, just three weeks after the failure of a door plug on one of the planes blew out shortly after take-off and threatened the lives of 171 people on board.

A statement from the airline said the return of the Boeing planes to the skies would begin, “with Flight 1146 from Seattle to San Diego on Friday afternoon, January 26.”

The statement also said that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) had approved Alaska Airline’s “detailed inspection and maintenance process for the 737-9 Max to return to flying,” two days prior and that the company’s technicians “began the inspections that night.”

The statement said the planes “will return to service only after the rigorous inspections are completed and each plane is deemed airworthy” and that the “individual inspections are expected to take up to 12 hours per aircraft.” The company expects all 65 of its planes to resume flights and fully operate its schedule by the end of next week.

United Airlines, which has a fleet of 79 of the Boeing planes, also reported that it had resumed its passenger flights on the 737 Max 9 on Saturday morning from Newark, New Jersey to Las Vegas, Nevada.

On Wednesday, the FAA said it was halting Boeing’s plans to expand the production of the faulty plane. In a press release, the government agency stated, “The FAA today informed Boeing it will not grant any production expansion of the MAX, including the 737-9 MAX.”

However, at the same time, the FAA said it had completed, “the enhanced maintenance and inspection process on each aircraft” and the door plugs “will be in

compliance with the original design which is safe to operate.” The FAA said the enhanced maintenance program included “an inspection of specific bolts, guide tracks and fittings,” and “detailed visual inspections of left and right mid-cabin exit door plugs and dozens of associated components.”

In other words, after years of catastrophic and deadly failures and numerous recent reports of loose bolts and other manufacturing problems with Boeing’s popular design—and before the National Transportation Safety Administration (NTSB) has completed its investigation into the cause of the door plug blowout—major airlines, with the support of the FAA, are returning 737 Max 9 planes to flight at an accelerated pace.

On January 5, after an Alaska Airlines flight from Portland, Oregon to Ontario, California was climbing at 16,000 feet, the door plug—which is a piece of the fuselage on the side of the plane—tore off and the plane depressurized. Miraculously, no one on board was seriously injured and the crew was able to descend, turn around and make an emergency landing in Portland.

According to airline experts, if the Max 9 aircraft had been flying at cruising altitude of between 30,000 and 40,000 feet, the impact of the blowout would have been catastrophic. As Dr. William Bensinger, a Seattle aviation medical examiner who has spent more than 40 years treating and evaluating pilots, told *The Oregonian*, “The most concerning to me would be if someone was sitting in the seat next to the blowout.”

“Rapid decompression like that would cause air to rush out of the cabin, and if someone were sitting in that chair with their seatbelt off, they would get sucked out of the airplane. ... It would have happened so fast you couldn’t react,” Bensinger said.

According to information released by NTSB representative Clint Crookshanks on January 9, the door plug is held in place by 12 stop pads on the opening that interface with 12 stop pins on the plug that prevent it from blowing out of the fuselage. Crookshanks said the installation of the plug requires guide tracks and roller guides to get it into position and there are four stop bolts designed to keep it from moving upward and disengaging the stops.

Crookshanks said, “The exam to date has shown that the door did in fact translate upward, [and] all 12 stops became disengaged allowing it to blow out of the fuselage.” He continued, “We found that both guide tracks on the plug were fractured. We have not yet recovered the four bolts that restrain it from its vertical movement, and we have not yet determined if they existed there. That will be determined when we take the plug to our lab in Washington, D.C.”

As of this writing, no further information has been provided by the NTSB about the cause of the door plug failure.

Behind the rush to return the Max 9 planes to service are the considerable financial and profit interests of Boeing and the airline companies. The day before Alaska Airlines resumed its Max 9 flights, the company said it would lose approximately \$150 million from the three-week grounding of the planes.

On Thursday, Alaska Airlines CFO Shane Tackett told investors, “we fully expect to be made whole for the profit impact of the grounding,” adding that there are no details of that compensation as of yet. With the \$150 million hit from the grounding, Alaska said it expects to report a full-year 2024 profit of about \$381 million to \$635 million, but that it could fall short of estimates of \$583 million. Analysts have forecast a loss of \$79 million in the first quarter.

United Airlines is expecting a loss in the first quarter due to the groundings, saying that it will have an adjusted loss of between 35 cents and 85 cents per share.



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