



Airline safety under the microscope

Congressional hearing scrutinizes relationship between FAA, airlines

By Eve Tahmincioglu

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Rachael Douglas was waiting for her Northwest flight from Memphis, Tenn., to Alexandria, La., to depart this past Sunday when she noticed the flight crew having difficulty shutting the cabin door.

From her seat, 1A, she had a good view of the crew and outside maintenance employees struggling to shut the door, which took an hour before it appeared to close properly.

About 30 minutes into the flight, she recalls, people started getting light headed and suddenly the plane took a nosedive. "We were terrified, holding hands," she explains.

When the plane leveled off, the pilot came on the loud speaker and told passengers not to panic, that the plane had just lost pressure and he was turning the plane around back to Memphis.

When Douglas finally got home she called and e-mailed Northwest Airlines and also e-mailed the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), but still hasn't received a reply about the harrowing event.

Officials at Northwest contacted by msnbc.com didn't immediately comment, though FAA spokesman Les Dorr acknowledged a cabin-pressure issue on the flight, but said "no emergency was declared."

As for door problems and a nosedive, Dorr said: "We found out the flight crew wrote up the issues. It appears there was a problem with the door but it doesn't say what it was." He said the airline removed and replaced the pressurization pressure selector, adding "what that actually means I really don't know."

"Someone needs to know about this," says Douglas. "These planes shouldn't be flying like that, should they?"

Safety at heart of hearings

Indeed, the question of whether the nation's airlines are being allowed to fly unsafe planes was at the very heart of congressional hearings held Thursday. Many agree the FAA dropped the ball on the inspection process at Southwest Airlines Co., causing more than 40 of the carrier's planes to be grounded last month prompting countless cancellations and delays for fliers.

The FAA issued a \$10.2 million fine against Southwest for intentionally flying planes that had not undergone key inspections. The government agency also admitted its own inspectors did not act properly.

While airline travelers have been inconvenienced because of the rash of plane groundings following the Southwest revelations, and will probably see more cancellations and delays in the near term, the bigger worry for fliers is safety.

Are U.S. airline carriers and the FAA doing enough to protect the American flying public?

Some experts say no.

"There's an ambiguity in the way the FAA oversees the air carriers," says Peter Goelz, an airline industry expert and the former managing director of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). "It's almost like a partnership between the FAA and the carriers in which the overwhelming amount of inspections that take place are done by the carriers themselves. The FAA's job is to oversee their inspections. They do spot checks."

The airlines, he adds, have been able to "manipulate the process to their advantage because the FAA can't inspect everything."

And he says, in the case of Southwest at least, the relationship between the FAA and the commercial airlines are "far too cozy. They assume no airline wants to be unsafe. No airline wants to kill their passengers."

So far, Northwest, which has visions of merging with Delta Airlines in the foreseeable future, has not grounded any of its planes. But the FAA said Wednesday four other U.S. carriers are also under investigation, but the agency would not name names.

Too close for comfort?

The relationship between FAA inspectors and airline personnel was a central issue during Thursday's congressional hearings. The panel investigated claims by two FAA inspectors who say they tried to correct maintenance problems at Southwest but their efforts were hampered. Allegedly, say the inspectors, Southwest was trying to choose FAA inspectors that would be more favorable to the carrier.

The two FAA inspectors who have become whistleblowers, Charalambe Boutris and Douglas Peters, testified before the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, and Boutris was asked if he thought the safety issue went beyond Southwest. He said it was "not just Southwest."

Rep. Peter A. DeFazio, who questioned the hearing witnesses, asked if federal regulators under the Bush administration have been focused on being customer friendly with the airlines "we should be regulating."

To that, Boutris answered: "We've forgotten about the most important customer, which is the taxpayers ... to ensure the airlines provide a safe transportation. Are we doing that? I don't believe we're doing that."

Lawmakers and airline advocates took great pains during the hearing to stress how safe air travel is in an apparent effort to not panic the public given the very nature of the hearing titled: "Critical Lapses in FAA Safety Oversight of Airlines: Abuses of Regulatory 'Partnership Programs.'"

Lapses in maintenance are in part a function of the precarious economic situation so many of the nation's airlines find themselves in given the high cost of fuel prices, says Richard Gritta, professor of finance and transportation at the University of Portland.

"When you're making tons of money it's easier to spend money," he notes.

"If operations managers and maintenance people are not ethical or are not behaving according to normal standards, things could be slipping by. And that appears to be the case at Southwest," he says.

Not everyone agrees that there should be safety concerns.

"Nobody wants to fly an unsafe airplane," says Ed Perkins, contributing editor to SmarterTravel.com. "The idea that airlines in the U.S. are cutting corners on safety to save a few bucks is simply not correct."

Perkins does believe that with so many domestic airlines outsourcing their maintenance departments to other companies there may be a bigger need for oversight. "But there is no evidence that they are unsafe. Put that to rest now."

After the Sept. 11th tragedy, and the airlines' financial problems that followed, carriers stepped up their efforts to outsource maintenance to third parties in the United States, Asia and Latin America. This created a situation where the lines of communication between the FAA and maintenance organizations were more far flung, says Jerry Chandler, a blogger for CheapFlights.com and the former contributing editor of Frequent Flyer magazine.

But that doesn't mean, he maintains, that safety went out the window. "The system is self-correcting," he explains. "What's happening on the Hill today is absolutely healthy so that the system continues to self correct."

"Thank God," he adds, "this corrective action taken is not of a nature that anyone has died or has been injured recently. Commercial aviation in this country is as safe as any system could possibly be."

Kate Hanni with the Coalition for Passenger Rights doesn't buy it.

"They're doing everything they can to save money," she says about the airlines.

"The infrastructure of our air travel system is like the Minnesota bridge collapse, it's eroding and there is a callous disregard for safety of airline passengers," she says. "There's going to be a disaster. We have to do something now."

Aside from safety concerns, what will it mean for airfares and air travel disruptions?

Airfares, already rising thanks to higher fuel costs, probably won't be impacted by the recent plane groundings, says Phil Baggaley, airline industry analyst for Standard & Poor's.

But expect more delays and cancellations in the short-term, contends Gritta. "It's going to create a backlash," he adds, with more questions about whether all the U.S. airline carriers' planes are safe.

The good news: "We'll see an increase in safety because the FAA will have to get off its tush."

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