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Senate probe reveals Boeing's 'troubling and recurring' safety failings

FAA Administrator Michael Whitaker's plans to testify on Wednesday.

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The Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations published a memo Wednesday including new details about Boeing safety failings relating to the Alaska Airlines door plug incident in January.

The committee staff memo -- released ahead of Federal Aviation Administration Administrator Michael Whitaker's planned testimony before the subcommittee on Wednesday -- suggested Boeing had failed to ensure adequate standards in multiple areas.

Boeing personnel, the memo said, "continue to feel pressure to prioritize speed of production over quality."

The Jan. 5 Alaska Airlines incident saw a door plug on flight 1282 blow out minutes after takeoff from Portland, Oregon, leaving a large hole in the side of the Boeing 737 Max 9 plane. The plane safely made an emergency landing and no one was seriously injured.

The memo noted the results of a May 2024 employee survey conducted by Boeing that found only 47% of workers answered favorably to the statement, "Schedule pressures do not cause my team to lower our standards."

Training also remains a problem, the memo said. "Boeing is failing to ensure many of their employees have the appropriate education, training, skills or experience to effectively perform their assigned tasks," it read.

The subcommittee said Boeing failed to ensure that nonconforming parts are appropriately documented, stored and dispositioned so that they are not installed on aircraft.

Quality inspection procedures -- and FAA review of those procedures -- also raised questions as to the qualifications and independence of inspectors, the memo said.

“Boeing personnel are allowed to inspect the quality of their own work,” it read.

“These troubling and recurring safety deficiencies raise questions about the FAA’s ability to oversee the quality and safety of Boeing aircraft through effective and lasting enforcement,” the memo said.

In a statement, Boeing said the company has “taken important steps to foster a safety culture that empowers and encourages all employees to share their voice, but it will require continuous focus. Under the FAA’s oversight, we are continuing to implement our comprehensive plan to strengthen Boeing’s safety management, quality assurance and safety culture.”

The FAA conducted an audit of Boeing in March, soon after the Alaska Airlines incident. The administration mandated a comprehensive action plan from Boeing to address its production issues, giving the company 90 days to comply. Boeing initiated a safety roadmap in May.

The FAA did not respond to a request for comment in time for publication.

Whitaker said during his Tuesday testimony that addressing Boeing’s safety culture “is not a six-month program. It’s a three-year, five-year program.”

Boeing, he added, “have put together a safety training program to roll out” as new talks continue. “That’s ready to roll out, but I think it’s going to take years of delivering that safety message to the employees actually seeing that safety is more important than production before that wealth of change,” Whitaker said.

Wednesday’s memo and Whitaker’s testimony are part of a wider inquiry that began on March 19, investigating Boeing’s safety and culture practices following whistleblower allegations.