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Senators want to see major changes at Boeing. The FAA says that could take years.

Mike Whitaker, head of the Federal Aviation Administration, on Wednesday warned senators that changing Boeing's safety culture isn't going to happen in months.

By **ORIANA PAWLYK**/Politico

The head of the Federal Aviation Administration warned senators Wednesday that ensuring troubled planemaker Boeing rights its ship will take years — not months — even with the FAA looking over its shoulder.

Since a plugged-over door on an Alaska Airlines Boeing 737 MAX 9 popped off mid-flight earlier this year, Boeing has been the subject of intense scrutiny from Congress, the FAA and even the Justice Department. The FAA has capped the planemaker's production and deployed more inspectors across its factory floors, among other steps.

But on Wednesday lawmakers on the Senate Homeland Security Committee's investigations panel peppered Mike Whitaker, the head of the FAA, with questions about whether it's done enough to make sure Boeing is forced to contend with its failures.

Whitaker outlined the steps his agency has taken — a detailed action plan, more inspectors, production caps and more involvement from the FAA in virtually every facet of Boeing's business. But perhaps his biggest message was patience.

"It would be — not possible to have company-wide culture change in a matter of months. I think it's going to take years," Whitaker said in response to the chair of the subcommittee Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.), who questioned whether changes should be implemented with more "urgency."

Speaking with reporters after the hearing, Whitaker said: "Everyone wants it fixed immediately."

But he said that while Boeing has improved on short-term challenges in its manufacturing lines, “[we] would be kidding ourselves to think you can change 170,000 people, culture in 18 months — so it’s going to be a long haul.”

Whitaker said the FAA has deployed more inspectors to factory floors across the country — 46 total so far.

But senators repeatedly questioned whether that’s enough and also whether the inspectors on the ground are simply pushing paper, instead of getting their hands dirty.

Blumenthal questioned whether 13 FAA inspectors at Boeing’s Renton facility — which he pointed out was one million square feet with roughly 12,000 employees — was enough.

Just “13 inspectors who will be there by the end of the year are inadequate to the task of really ensuring the public that there is quality control by an objective and independent entity — that’s just a fact of life,” Blumenthal told Whitaker in his second appearance on Capitol Hill this week to discuss how Boeing is improving and FAA’s actions since the door plug incident.

The FAA’s goal is to increase its inspector workforce to 55 by year’s end, Whitaker said, with 13 inspectors each at Boeing’s Renton and Everett plants in Washington; another 13 in Charleston, South Carolina; and 16 in various supplier facilities.

Blumenthal and Sen. Laphonza Butler (D-Calif.) also asked what an FAA inspector’s role is, and the extent to which they are actually inspecting work, rather than inspecting paperwork.

“How do you take what ... you’re learning through those investigators, and then turn that into something that ensures greater confidence for the public?” Butler said.

Whitaker responded that those inspectors continue to hold meetings with Boeing managers, receive feedback, and use their findings to look into where the company can still make improvements.

Additionally, senators questioned Whitaker about new information the committee released Wednesday showing an employee survey conducted in May 2024 which revealed that employees still feel that they’re being pressured to prioritize production above quality work.

In a statement responding to the new information, a Boeing spokesperson 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.”

Lowering standards for the sake of production “is a profoundly disturbing finding,” Blumenthal said.

Whitaker answered that the changes that the FAA has mandated within the last nine months have produced more chances “to have spontaneous inspection[s] ... and get better data that way,” Whitaker said.

That said, “those employees that [Boeing] surveyed, a lot of them, aren’t going to believe it until they’ve seen it for years,” Whitaker said of the necessary culture change. “They need to hear from their leaders ... we know that takes a long time, but there are a lot of aspects of this that have been rolled out and are being rolled out,” he said.