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Facing skeptical Senate committee, FAA chief defends Boeing oversight

By PAIGE CORNWELL and DOMINIC GATES/The Seattle Times

As Boeing's focus shifts to an ongoing Machinists strike, FAA Administrator Mike Whitaker testified at a Senate hearing Wednesday, defending the federal agency's oversight of the aviation company and outlining progress in improving its safety culture — in face of harsh questioning from senators.

“As we carry out our regulatory responsibilities and oversight activities, safety will always inform our decision-making, and I am prepared to use the full range of my authority to ensure accountability whether from a manufacturer, an air carrier, or the FAA's own operations,” Whitaker said in front of the Senate subcommittee.

Boeing will have to meet key metrics related to safety, Whitaker said, before the FAA will lift a production cap of 38 MAX planes per month, which was put in place after a fuselage blowout on board Alaska Airlines Flight 1282 in January. He added those requirement improvements are different from previous efforts.

“If they don't do that they don't grow, and if they don't grow they're not going to be able to achieve profitability,” he said.

Production at Boeing's Everett and Renton plants, meanwhile, are at a standstill because of the Machinists strike that began Sept. 13 after union members rejected a tentative contract.

The Senate hearing was the second congressional panel Whitaker faced this week focused on Boeing oversight. On Tuesday, he told a House subcommittee that changes to Boeing's safety culture will take years but the aviation giant has made meaningful shifts in the short term.

Before the hearing by the subcommittee, Senate staff released a document alleging continued safety lapses at Boeing's factories this year and that mechanics are still facing pressure to prioritize schedule over quality. The subcommittee is led by chairman Sen. Richard Blumenthal,

D.-Conn., and ranking member Sen. Ron Johnson, R.-Wis., within the Senate Committee on Homeland Security & Governmental Affairs.

The document is based on record requests to Boeing and the Federal Aviation Administration by the subcommittee, which has been aggressive in going after Boeing since the panel blowout.

Much of the information was gathered in a six-week period after that in-flight incident, and Boeing has since then been under intense FAA scrutiny and has developed a plan that the FAA approved to improve its manufacturing processes and address the quality lapses.

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

Following the Alaska incident, the FAA capped 737 MAX production and Boeing slowed its assembly lines to rates even lower. It also stopped the practice of allowing MAX fuselages to leave the factory of its supplier Spirit AeroSystems in Wichita, Kan., if they have many jobs incomplete.

Whitaker has said the FAA is on track to reach its target of adding 55 inspectors to Boeing and Spirit facilities — a decision made in the aftermath of the Alaska incident — and on Wednesday said the agency will have 13 each in Boeing’s Renton, Everett and North Charleston, S.C., plants. The FAA has 11 inspectors currently assigned to the Renton plant, a number questioned by Blumenthal and Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley, noting that Renton has 12,000 employees and a floor of more than 1 million square feet.

The FAA chief responded that the inspectors are there to oversee, not run, the quality system, and the head count allows them to go to each station in the build process and talk to employees.

“Inspectors are there to make sure they have a robust quality-management system and it’s functioning,” he said.

At a hearing in April, the same subcommittee cited allegations by several Boeing whistleblowers of serious safety risks.

The subcommittee highlights an FAA special audit of Boeing's MAX assembly plant in Renton and Spirit's plant in Wichita. Conducted in the six weeks following the Alaska blowout, it found inadequate training of newly hired mechanics.

"During this audit, the FAA recorded 23 examples ... where employees failed to follow processes or lacked proficiency," the audit found.

In addition, some Boeing employees were not given the tools to show that their work met regulatory standards. The FAA found a door mechanic using an improvised measuring device to check a gap between two components and who told the inspector other mechanics used similar unauthorized tools.

That same audit found an absence of process control for aircraft parts not conforming to regulatory standards that should have been scrapped, implying a risk that they could be installed on airplanes.

An FAA review also found Boeing personnel were allowed to inspect the quality of their own work fabricating subassemblies at Boeing facilities production in the Puget Sound region and in Salt Lake City, Utah. The FAA acknowledged this "appeared to pose an inherent conflict of interest," the subcommittee stated.

The investigation is continuing into the midair blowout of a door-sized fuselage panel on an Alaska Airlines 737 MAX 9 on Jan. 5. The National Transportation Safety Board is analyzing 20 hours' worth of testimony from two days of hearings in August, along with thousands of pages of interviews and information gathered from field visits. Investigations can take up to two years to conclude, the NTSB has said.