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Airlines: Bedding with the FAA

03/28/2008

American Airlines grounded 325 aircraft on Wednesday, stranding passengers across the country because of a safety inspection lapse. The problem was revealed by a new audit program imposed by the Federal Aviation Administration.

We'd like to think that this demonstrates the FAA now is on the ball when it comes to airliner safety, but there is reason to doubt it.

The doubt arises mainly from troubling news about Southwest Airlines and evidence suggesting that some FAA personnel may have become entirely too close to the airlines that agency inspectors are supposed to oversee.

Last year, 46 Southwest jets made some 60,000 flights before the airline noticed that the planes were 30 months overdue for safety inspections of their fuselages. Southwest reported the mistake to the FAA.

However, Southwest allowed the planes to keep flying for eight days and make 1,400 flights after it discovered the problem. Federal rules say the planes should have been grounded.

The Dallas Morning News quoted government reports saying that six Boeing 737s were found to have a cracks in the fuselage, one of them three inches long. That's a serious concern; failure of a pressurized hull at high altitudes could have catastrophic consequences. Earlier this month, the FAA proposed a \$10.2 million fine on Southwest for the incident.

Meanwhile, an investigation by the U.S. House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee found that another 70 Southwest planes flew without required rudder inspections for at least a year. Committee Chairman James L. Oberstar, D-Minn., said he found "strong evidence of systemic flaws" in Southwest's safety program.

There are more worrisome reports coming from the U.S. Office of Special Counsel, which investigates complaints of retribution against whistleblowers inside the government. FAA safety inspector Charalambe Boutris tried to initiate an investigation after he learned last year that Southwest had flown the uninspected planes. In response, Southwest allegedly tried to get the inspector removed from his job. Mr. Boutris' boss refused, but told the inspector not to report his discovery to FAA higher-ups until he "gave the green light."

Mr. Boutris and another inspector, Douglas Peters, took their complaints to the Office of Special Counsel, which informed the Secretary of Transportation in December.

All of this raises concerns that some officials at the FAA have lost perspective on the proper relationship between the agency and the airlines. The FAA has what it calls a "partnership" program in which it relies on airlines themselves to do most inspections and report their own errors. Some of that is inevitable; the FAA's 3,000 inspectors could not possibly do all the checks on their own.

But the House committee staff found that some FAA inspectors feel pressured from their bosses to go easy on all airlines, not just Southwest. Inspectors said FAA officials are "too close to airline management" and that exposing problems would threaten their careers.

The Professional Aviation Safety Specialists Union, which represents FAA inspectors, complains of "cozy" relations between FAA management and the airlines. The FAA is becoming "the protector of the airline, rather than the flying public," says the union.

After the Southwest incident came to light, the FAA this month announced an audit of inspection practices at all major airlines. That audit caught the error at American, which hadn't properly checked wire bundles on its MD-80 airliners. As it turned out, bundles on 80 of the planes needed to be modified.

This whole sorry story ought to concern air travelers, including those in St. Louis; Southwest has a 26 percent share of the market at Lambert Field; American, 34 percent.

Safety inspections are serious business. They cannot be allowed to become haphazard, and that becomes more likely if the FAA cuddles up with airline management. Let's hope the FAA leadership now is awake to the problem. If not, the agency may need a house cleaning, starting with the executive suite.

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