

US invites world's aviation regulators to meeting on Boeing's 737 MAX

25 April 2019, by Luc Olinga



Acting administrator of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Daniel Elwell faced tough questioning last month at a Senate hearing on the Boeing 737 MAX

Facing criticism that it is too close to Boeing, the Federal Aviation Administration has invited global regulators to a meeting on the Boeing 737 MAX next month as it works to restore confidence following two deadly crashes.

The forum, scheduled for May 23 in Washington, aims to outline for civilian aviation regulators the US agency's process for returning the 737 MAX to service, an FAA spokesman said Thursday.

The aircraft was grounded worldwide in mid-March following crashes by Ethiopian Airlines and Lion Air that together claimed 346 lives.

Those invited include the heads of aviation authorities in China, Canada, Brazil, Ethiopia, Indonesia and European countries.

The gathering comes as the FAA faces scrutiny of its oversight and questions about international civil aviation authorities' customary deference to

manufacturers' domestic regulators—in this case the FAA.

"It's unusual for the FAA, or any major agency, to need to work hard to get other international regulatory agencies to go along with their decisions," said Richard Aboulafia, a vice president at Teal Group, a consultancy.

"This reflects the FAA's currently diminished authority, which, hopefully, will recover with time."

Scott Hamilton of the consultancy Leeham Company said American officials were working to demonstrate the credibility of their oversight of Boeing as the company works on fixes to the 737 MAX.

"The FAA is going to tell international regulators what it has done to review and validate the upgrades and try and convince them what the FAA did this time is bullet-proof," he said.

No industry participation

The session, which will not have any industry participation, will "discuss the agency's activities toward ensuring the safe return of Boeing 737 MAX to service," an FAA spokesman said in an email to AFP.

The agency will provide participants with the "safety analysis that will inform its decision to return the 737 MAX fleet to service in the US when it is made," the spokesman said.

"Also, the FAA will provide safety experts to answer any questions participants have related to their respective decisions to return the fleet to service."

FAA acting chief Daniel Elwell was grilled last month by a US Senate panel over the agency's relationship with Boeing, whether it was rigorous enough in approving new features of the 737 MAX,

and quick enough to respond to the accidents.

The regulator, which has historically enjoyed a strong reputation among international aviation bodies, was criticized for not immediately grounding the 737 MAX following the second fatal crash in March, a delay that raised suspicions of a too-cozy relationship between inspectors and the American aircraft manufacturer.

In the end, the FAA grounded the jets only after other major regulators took the step, including those from China and Europe.

The agency has also come under scrutiny for effectively outsourcing elements of its certification process to Boeing.

"This is a much needed effort by the FAA to regain the confidence of the international aviation community in the certification process of the FAA," Jim Hall, the former head of the National Transportation Safety Board, told AFP.

"I don't think that the FAA can regain the confidence it lost with the 737 Max failures and omissions in one meeting but it certainly is a step in the right direction."

Need for coordination

Boeing executives said Wednesday they are working closely with the FAA and other regulators to return the 737 MAX to service, but gave no timetable.

The company is working on a software fix for an anti-stall system implicated in the crisis. After submitting a request for formal certification, Boeing expects to conduct a certification flight with the FAA and then to seek approval from international regulators.

Analysts have predicted the planes could resume service in late summer or fall.

They have also raised the possibility that the 737 MAX could make a staggered return to service if the FAA moves more quickly than other bodies to clear it for service.

But Michel Merluzeau of Air Insight Research said the FAA would strongly prefer that its approval of the 737 MAX to fly again be swiftly followed by official okays from other bodies.

This would help preserve the tradition of reciprocity among regulators in the certifications of new technologies to meet rising global flying demand, he said.

"They want the 737 MAX to return in a synchronized manner," Merluzeau told AFP in an interview. "Otherwise, you could have the bodies operating in silos and that would slow down innovation."

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