

Pilots criticize Boeing for mistakes on its grounded jet

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In this June 11, 2011, file photo, former Capt. Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger talks to the media in front of the US Airways flight 1549 aircraft at the Carolina Aviation Museum in Charlotte, N.C. The president of the pilots' union at American Airlines says Boeing made mistakes in its design of the 737 Max and not telling pilots about new flight-control software on the plane. Sullenberger, the captain who safely landed a disabled jetliner on the Hudson River in 2009, is also expected to testify. He has said that Boeing was more focused on protecting its product, the Max, than protecting the people who use it. (AP Photo/Chuck Burton, File)

Airline union leaders and a famed former airline pilot said Wednesday that Boeing made mistakes while developing the 737 Max, and the biggest was not telling anybody about new flight-control software so that pilots could train for it.

Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger, who landed a crippled airliner safely on the Hudson River in 2009, said he doubted that any U.S. pilots practiced handling a specific malfunction until it happened on two Max jets that crashed, killing 346 people. He said Max pilots should train for such emergencies in simulators—not just on computers, as Boeing proposes.

"We should all want pilots to experience these challenging situations for the first time in a simulator, not in flight, with passengers and crew on board," Sullenberger said, "and reading about it on an iPad is not even close to sufficient."

Sullenberger's comments to the House aviation subcommittee came during the third congressional hearing on Boeing's troubled plane, which has been grounded for three months.

The president of the pilots' union at American Airlines said Boeing's zeal to minimize pilot-training costs for airlines that would buy the 737 Max jet contributed to design errors and inadequate training. That has left a "crisis of trust" around aviation safety, he said.

Former Federal Aviation Administration chief Randy Babbitt said his old agency too readily accepted Boeing's design changes on the Max, and pilots should have been better trained. Sara Nelson, president of the largest flight attendants' union, joined in hammering Boeing and the FAA, although she has recently noticed "a chastened tone" from the company.

As the hearing unfolded in Washington, the head of the pilots' union at Southwest Airlines in Dallas said his group will seek compensation from Boeing for lost flying assignments and the costs of complying with a Justice Department subpoena for its records, which are part of the government's criminal investigation into Boeing.

All of the comments underscore the challenges that Boeing still faces in winning the confidence of pilots that the Max can be made safe. Those pilots, in turn, are key to convincing reluctant passengers to fly on the plane.

"That bond between the passenger and the pilot is one that is critical," Boeing CEO Dennis Muilenburg said during an investor presentation in April.

Pilots complain that Boeing did not tell them about flight software called MCAS until after the October crash of a Lion Air jet in Indonesia. That same software, which could misfire on the failure of a single sensor, was implicated in a second crash five months later of an Ethiopian Airlines jet.



This Dec. 7, 2015, file photo shows the second Boeing 737 MAX airplane being built on the assembly line in Renton, Wash. The president of the pilots' union at American Airlines says Boeing made mistakes in its design of the 737 Max and not telling pilots about new flight-control software on the plane. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren, File)

The MCAS software was designed to make the Max feel like previous 737 models to pilots despite engines that were larger and placed more forward on the wings and changed the plane's aerodynamics.

"This was a fatal design flaw built into the aircraft at the factory," Carey said in an interview before the hearing.

Carey told the lawmakers that video training for pilots on the MCAS updates would be enough to get the planes back into the air, but he advocated simulator training during each pilot's training updates.

Boeing engineers have finished making fixes to the software and expect to soon demonstrate its work to government safety officials on test flights in hopes that the FAA will certify the plane as safe.

The changes will be accompanied by additional pilot training. FAA technical experts endorsed Boeing's conclusion that simulator time is not immediately needed for pilots who know how to fly older 737 models. Acting FAA Administrator Daniel Elwell said recently the agency has not made a final decision.

Carey and Sullenberger also questioned the FAA's independence from Boeing and other companies it regulates. Sullenberger criticized an FAA program that relies on industry employees to perform some safety tests and inspections, and he urged lawmakers to give FAA more money so it can do the work itself.

No one from Boeing Co. testified at Wednesday's hearing. Rep. Peter DeFazio, an Oregon Democrat and chairman of the full House Transportation Committee, said his panel has received "a substantial number" of the documents it has requested from Boeing and the FAA about development and approval of the Max, and he will summon the company to a future hearing.

In a statement, Boeing spokesman Peter Pedraza said Boeing was providing information to regulators, airlines and pilots "to re-earn their trust and know we must be more transparent going forward."

Boeing's path to regaining trust still looks bumpy. Jon Weaks, president of the pilots' union at Southwest—which owns 34 Max jets, more than any other carrier, and is the world's biggest 737 operator—faulted Boeing for many missteps during the crisis.

"Boeing seems to receive more bad news with every passing week and still needs to learn how to rebuild trust as well as the airplane," Weaks wrote in a memo to his pilots on Wednesday.

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