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For months, US pilots have complained about safety issues with Boeing 737 Max 8 jets

By [Matt Rocheleau](#) Globe Staff, March 13, 2019, 1:54 p.m.



A Boeing 737 Max 8 flown by Southwest Airlines taxis to the gate at Baltimore Washington International Airport. Southwest has the most Max 8's of any airline. JIM WATSON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Pilots in the United States have logged safety concerns with federal authorities in recent months about a new version of the Boeing 737 jetliner that's now under intense [scrutiny](#) following a pair of deadly crashes just months apart.

[Countries across the world](#) have ordered the [737 Max 8 jets](#) to be grounded in the wake of the most recent crash Sunday in Ethiopia, which killed 157 people.

The US Federal Aviation Administration held out longer than most. President Trump said Wednesday afternoon he was issuing an emergency order grounding all 737 Max 8 and Max 9 planes.

Federal records show the FAA has received safety complaints about the jets, which have only been in service since 2017.

Pilots have logged more than a dozen reports outlining a range of concerns over apparent equipment malfunctions, confusing manuals, and a lack of training with the 737 Max jets, according to reports filed in the federal Aviation Safety Reporting System.

The reports, which were first uncovered Tuesday by the [Dallas Morning News](#), are filed through a system that is designed to protect the confidentiality of aviation personnel who file the complaints. The reports published online do not contain specific details about each incident, including airline names.

Several complaints were filed in November, the month following the first 737 Max 8 crash, which occurred in Indonesia, killing 189 people. A preliminary report on that disaster indicated that pilots struggled to maintain control following an equipment malfunction.

- In one of the November reports, a pilot said “an autopilot anomaly” led to “an undesired brief nose down situation.”

The pilot said that shortly after takeoff and while the plane was still climbing, autopilot was engaged, but, soon after, the copilot “called ‘DESCENDING’ followed by an almost immediate: ‘DONT SINK DONT SINK.’ ”

The pilot said they were able to quickly correct the issue by shutting off autopilot.

The pilot’s report speculated on the cause. “Best guess from me is airspeed fluctuation due to mechanical shear/frontal passage that overwhelmed automation temporarily or something incorrectly setup in MCP (Mode Control Panel).”

“With the concerns with the MAX 8 nose down stuff, we both thought it appropriate to bring it to your attention,” the pilot’s report said.

A separate report, which seemed to be about the same incident but was filed by the copilot, said: “We discussed the departure at length and I reviewed in my mind our automation setup and flight profile but can’t think of any reason the aircraft would pitch nose down so aggressively.”

■ In another report logged in November, a pilot said that an “emergency airworthiness directive” for the Max 8 jets, which the FAA [issued](#) just days after the Indonesia crash calling for updates to operations manuals, did not address all of the potential problems pilots may encounter.

“I think it is unconscionable that a manufacturer, the FAA, and the airlines would have pilots flying an airplane without adequately training, or even providing available resources and sufficient documentation to understand the highly complex systems that differentiate this aircraft from prior models,” the report said. “The fact that this airplane requires such jury rigging to fly is a red flag. Now we know the systems employed are error prone — even if the pilots aren’t sure what those systems are, what redundancies are in place, and failure modes.”

“I am left to wonder: what else don’t I know? The Flight Manual is inadequate and almost criminally insufficient. All airlines that operate the MAX must insist that Boeing incorporate ALL systems in their manuals.”

■ Another November report from a pilot said there was “an altitude deviation due to an intermediate level off by the aircraft automation.” The pilot said aircraft equipment contributed to the issue, but also put some of the blame on the crew themselves.

“Not much experience in MAX-800, as a result, still have to search for everything . . . As a relatively new First Officer, I had not seen this issue. However, I could have done a better job with VVM (Verbalize, Verify, Monitor) to back up the Captain with his duties while flying.”

■ Also that month, a pilot said that they and their copilot became confused and spent an entire hourlong flight trying to figure out the meaning of an error code that arose on their aircraft and also struggled to figure out what certain knobs and switches do.

The pilot blamed “poor training and even poorer documentation.”

In a lengthy complaint about a confusing switch, the pilot wrote: “I have no idea what switch the preflight is talking about, nor do I understand even now what this switch does. I think this entire setup needs to be thoroughly explained to pilots. How can a Captain not know what switch is meant during a preflight setup?”

The pilot also reported: “The Flight Manual does not address at least one annunciation, or the controls for the display — or if it does, neither pilot could find the explanation,” the complaint said. “I have spent literally days looking for an explanation, could not find one, and that is why I wrote this report. It shouldn’t be this hard to figure out what I’m looking at.”

“It is not reassuring when a light cannot be explained or understood by the pilots, even after referencing their flight manuals,” the pilot added.

■ In October, a pilot, who said it was his just second time flying a 737 Max jet, reported “the autothrottles failed to move to the commanded position during takeoff and climb.”

“Shortly afterwards I heard about the [other carrier] accident and am wondering if any other crews have experienced similar incidents with the autothrottle system on the MAX? Or I may have made a possible flying mistake which is more likely. The [First Officer] was still on his first month and was not able to identify whether it was the aircraft or me that was in error.”

■ Concerns about the 737 Max planes date back further, too. For example, in October 2017, a pilot complained about not being told that using a certain button on the plane would lead the aircraft to change altitude.

“This safety issue was unexpected and could lead to an altitude violation and safety hazard,” the pilot said.

■ In several additional reports, crews relayed worries about other problems, including Wi-Fi outages that cut off access to flight plans, electronic messages failing to get to maintenance personnel, unexpectedly high fuel usage, and multiple pilots reported confusion over the jets controls and manuals, sometimes because of inadequate training.

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