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As safety concerns increase, US grounds troubled Boeing 737 model

By [Adam Vaccaro](#) and [Matt Rocheleau](#) Globe Staff, March 13, 2019, 8:59 p.m.



A Boeing 737 Max 8 flown by Southwest Airlines taxied to the gate at Baltimore Washington International Airport on Wednesday. JIM WATSON/AFP/GETTY IMAGES/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

The Trump administration ordered all Boeing 737 Max 8 and Max 9 planes grounded Wednesday, three days after a deadly crash in Ethiopia that prompted many other governments around the world to quickly halt the use of the troubled model.

With safety concerns from workers in the airline industry, passengers, and regulators in other countries mounting, President Trump announced that “all of those planes are grounded, effective immediately,” following similar action from Canada.

The grounding, Trump said, “didn’t have to be made, but we thought it was the right decision.”

The crash of an Ethiopian Airlines Boeing Max 8 that killed 157 passengers and crew on Sunday was the second fatal accident of that make of plane. In October, a Lion Air flight in Indonesia went down, killing 189.

After the Lion Air accident, the Federal Aviation Administration in November issued an emergency warning about potential problems controlling the plane under certain circumstances that could lead to “significant altitude loss, and possible impact with terrain” but said it expected the problem to be rectified soon.

The FAA took a similar approach Monday following the Ethiopian Airlines crash, saying it was investigating and would “take appropriate action if the data indicates the need to do so,” even as other nations swiftly ordered the planes not to fly in their airspace. The FAA eventually grounded the planes based on “new evidence collected at the site and analyzed . . . together with newly refined satellite data.”

The emergency order said the data indicate similarities between the two crashes that needed to be investigated.

Commercial tracking data have shown both planes’ ascents were erratic.

The effect on air travel Boston will be small; according to the Massachusetts Port Authority, the Boeing planes were scheduled to be used for just 1.25 percent of flights at Logan International Airport in March. Still, within minutes of Trump's announcement, an American Airlines flight from Miami that had been scheduled to arrive at Logan around 9 p.m. Wednesday was canceled.

Juliette Kayyem, a former Massachusetts and federal security official, flew on a 737 Max jet to Boston from Miami Sunday just hours after the Ethiopian crash and initially was not concerned about the Boeing model. But after comparisons were drawn between the two crashes, and other countries began grounding the plane, Kayyem said she was alarmed.

"I would not get on this plane right now, and I'm not alone," she said. "It cannot be stated enough what an outlier situation this is for the United States. . . . We have always been at the fore, setting the standard, and every other country has followed us."

Kayyem said that if the FAA had not grounded the planes, airlines may have eventually faced lawsuits or boycotts.

The two US carriers with the largest fleets of 737 Max jets, American and Southwest Airlines, each use the planes on some Logan flights. Before the grounding, American and Southwest had expressed confidence in the planes and their pilots' ability to operate them safely.

But passengers had begun to pepper American Airlines, for example, on social media about flying on the planes. After the FAA order, American said it would "make every effort to rebook customers as quickly as possible, and we apologize for any inconvenience." The airline said the 737 Max planes usually serve three to four flights a day at Logan.

Boeing said in a statement that it “continues to have full confidence in the safety of the 737 MAX” but supported the grounding “out of an abundance of caution and in order to reassure the flying public of the aircraft’s safety.”

Federal records also indicate some pilots and other airline workers had filed more than a dozen safety complaints about the 737 Max planes. Concerns ranged from apparent equipment malfunctions, confusing manuals, and a lack of training with the new models, which were introduced by Boeing in 2017 and quickly became among the maker’s best-selling planes, with about 400 worldwide.

The complaints, first reported Tuesday by the Dallas Morning News, are filed through a system that protects the confidentiality of aviation personnel. The reports published online do not contain specific details about each incident, including airline names.

Several were filed in November, soon after the Lion Air crash. In one, a pilot said “an autopilot anomaly” led to “an undesired brief nose down situation,” while another pilot reported “an altitude deviation due to an intermediate level off by the aircraft automation.” That second pilot said aircraft equipment contributed to the issue but also put some blame on the crew.

In another report logged in November, a pilot said an “emergency airworthiness directive” the FAA issued after the Indonesia crash did not address all of the potential problems pilots may encounter.

“The fact that this airplane requires such jury rigging to fly is a red flag,” the pilot wrote in the complaint. “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.”

However, the unions representing pilots for several major airlines had said the Boeing planes were safe to fly, while a major union representing flight attendants and ground crews called for them to be investigated.

A preliminary report on the Lion Air crash issued by Indonesian authorities in late November said the pilots reported the nose of the plane diving several times and instruments gave different altitudes as they tried to bring the flight back to the airport.

Senator Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, a presidential candidate who on Tuesday had called for the FAA to ground the planes, criticized Trump for not acting sooner and urged Congress to investigate.

“About time,” she wrote on Twitter. “Now it’s Congress’s job to figure out what went wrong here, and why this decision took so long, to make sure it doesn’t happen again. Nothing should come before the safety and security of the American people — especially not corporate profits or political favors.”

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