

Congressional hearing highlights close ties between Boeing and FAA

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Nearly three weeks after the second of two deadly plane crashes that claimed the lives of 346 people, the Senate Subcommittee on Aviation and Space convened Wednesday to question the heads of the federal agencies responsible for overseeing the verification of new aircraft.

The hearing is in response to the March 10 crash of Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302, when a Boeing 737 Max 8 airplane nose-dived into the ground six minutes after takeoff from Addis Ababa, killing all 157 passengers and crew. It occurred in the wake of a similar disaster five months earlier, when a Boeing 737 Max 8 operated by Lion Air crashed thirteen minutes after leaving Jakarta, Indonesia, killing a further 189 people.

The day after the March 10 crash, countries around the world grounded the 737 Max 8, citing safety concerns. The United States was the last holdout, claiming that the aircraft had “continued airworthiness” until finally grounding the plane on March 13.

The witnesses at the Senate hearing included FAA Acting Administrator Dan Elwell, National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) Chairman Robert Sumwalt and Department of Transportation Inspector General Calvin Scovel. Their comments made clear that the interests of the aerospace giant dominate the federal oversight and regulatory agencies.

Elwell detailed the process through which Boeing is allowed to review its own safety systems under a program called Organization Designation Authorization. “The Organization Designation Authorization (ODA) program is the means by which the FAA may authorize an organization to act as a representative of the FAA, allowing that organization to conduct inspections and tests and issue certificates on behalf of the FAA.” This program, established in 2005, has let Boeing and other airline companies

operate with virtually no independent oversight of the safety of any new civilian planes.

In particular, it allowed Boeing to produce the Max 8 variant of the Boeing 737 without FAA oversight. Elwell stated, “As a result of regular meetings between the FAA and Boeing teams, the FAA determined in February 2012 that the [Max 8] project qualified ... [a] project eligible for management by the Boeing ODA.”

This extended to the Maneuvering Characteristics Augmenting System, or MCAS, the system which is suspected to have caused the crash in October 2018. It is also suspected as the cause of the March 10 disaster, with Ethiopian Airlines’ chief executive, Tewolde Gebremariam, stating that he believed the system was in fact on during that crash.

The hearing also exposed the role of the various pilots’ unions that authorized pilots to fly the Max 8. Elwell stated, “To a group, we [the pilots’ unions] are absolutely confident in the safety of the aircraft and our pilots level of training in flying it.”

In reality, individual pilots did in fact raise issues about the safety of the Max 8, and particularly the MCAS anti-stall feature. Many have come out stating that they were unaware of the system and that it was not mentioned in manuals or Max 8 flight training. They also did not have access to flight simulators that could replicate the problems caused if MCAS is given faulty sensor data, the most likely reason for the two crashes.

These truths reveal the real relationship between Boeing and the aerospace industry as a whole and the US government. Boeing is the second largest US contractor, next to Lockheed Martin. It received \$23.4 billion in 2017, mostly from the Department of Defense and the Air Force. It is the world’s fifth largest defense contractor and largest US exporter.

Moreover, Boeing is a key part of the US financial system. Since the 737 Max 8 series was released in 2017, the 5,011 orders Boeing has received have accounted for 50 percent of the company's profits. Since the March 10 crash, Boeing's stock has lost half of its gains since the new year.

Boeing has immense influence on the US political system. Its political action committee donates large sums to both parties, including among its beneficiaries Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi. Last year the company spent \$15 million in lobbying and employed more than a dozen lobbying firms. The acting defense secretary, Patrick Shanahan, is a former Boeing executive.

Even as the hearings were underway, Boeing executive Mike Sinnott, rejected calls for new oversight over Boeing's aircraft development process. He also defended the relationship between the FAA and Boeing, including the ODA program, despite being under scrutiny by Congress, a Department of Transportation audit and a Department of Justice criminal investigation.

During the hearing, Senate Democrats attempted to posture as fighters for increased regulation and oversight. Richard Blumenthal stated that he was preparing legislation to increase FAA oversight. Tom Udall noted Boeing's longstanding insider connections with the US political establishment. Ed Markey demanded that the FAA ban "selling safety features a la carte to airlines."

They are fooling no one. The Democrats, no less than the Republicans, have been at the forefront of deregulating the airline industry. The first step in this process came under the Carter administration, which passed the Airline Deregulation Act in 1978. It disbanded the Civil Aeronautics Board, which up to that point treated interstate airlines as a public utility, setting routes, schedules and fares.

Carter, supported by Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy, instead allowed airlines to set their own fares and routes. The resulting consolidation of the industry in the past half-century has produced higher fares and fees, more crowded planes and an industry dominated by only four major carriers. It has become one of the most unregulated industries in the country, essentially allowing companies to act as both manufacturer and safety regulator, at the expense of human lives.



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