

Floor Statement
FY 2020 THUD Appropriations Bill: Aviation Safety
U.S. Senator Susan Collins
October 29, 2019

Let me turn to speak on another important issue that is addressed in the Transportation Appropriations bill that is on the Senate floor right now, and that is aviation safety. I know the presiding officer also has done a great deal in this area and that the CEO of Boeing is testifying on Capitol Hill today. The importance of aviation safety in light of the crashes of the two Boeing 737 MAX aircrafts cannot be overstated. Last October, Lion Air flight 610 crashed shortly after takeoff in Indonesia, killing all 189 passengers and crew onboard. And just five months later in March of this year, the Ethiopian Airlines flight crash killed 157 passengers and crew.

It is simply unacceptable that both of these crashes involve the same aircraft—the Boeing 737 MAX— and were likely caused because of the same new system known as MCAS, as well as pilots unfamiliarity with the system and a lack of training. More egregious was the fact that the changes were made to MCAS after certification for this system had already been delegated by the FAA to Boeing. It is clear that Boeing did everything it could to avoid having to provide additional training or make pilots even aware of the MCAS system. Mr. President, like you, I have met with some of the families of the victims of these crashes and their pain and grief are truly heartbreaking. I am committed to ensuring that we never experience anything like this ever again.

As Chairman of the THUD Subcommittee, I've been working with my Ranking Member, Senator Jack Reed, to do our part in improving aviation safety. We need to hold accountable not only Boeing, but also the FAA and any other entities that may have played a role in these crashes. In July, our THUD Subcommittee held an oversight hearing of the FAA where we questioned the Acting Deputy Administrator and the Associate Administrator for Aviation Safety on the agency's review of the MAX aircraft as well as the agency's aircraft certification processes.

Since that time, numerous recommendations have been issued by the National Transportation Safety Board and the Joint Authorities Technical Review, which consisted of technical efforts from leading international aviation regulators. First and foremost, it is imperative that both Boeing and the FAA admit the mistakes made with the MAX aircraft and remedy those serious errors in order to gain the public's trust in the aircraft again. Just today, Boeing's CEO testified before Congress and admitted that Boeing “made mistakes and got some things wrong.”

However, we've yet to hear what specific changes the FAA will require from Boeing prior to bringing the MAX back into service and what long-term changes they will make to their aviation and aircraft certification process. Ranking Member Jack Reed and I continue to send letters and inquiries to the FAA for additional information regarding the agency's Organization Designation Authorization—the ODA program—as well as statements made by FAA officials at our July hearing, which appeared to be incomplete at best and possibly outright wrong.

We need to make sure that FAA is a check on the delegation process—a true check—and is not captured by the industry that it regulates. Safety has to be the number one priority for FAA, way ahead of making sure that manufacturers can meet their deadlines for aircraft delivery. Safety has to come first. As a result of the work we conducted on our THUD Subcommittee and our oversight hearing, Ranking Member Reed and I have provided increased funding for aviation safety and aircraft certification activities.

The need for additional staffing has been confirmed by the Joint Authorities Technical Review Report, which determined that FAA's certification office for Boeing had inadequate staff involved in the MAX certification program. In addition, the Joint Authorities found that FAA needs to expand its staffing for human factors and human system integration work as it relates to aircraft certification. In other words, if there's a new system, we cannot allow training on that system to be bypassed and mention of that system to not be included in the manuals that accompany the aircraft. Pilots have to know going into that cockpit exactly what could happen and they need training on simulators.

Clearly a lot of work needs to be done on this issue. I believe that we have taken some important first steps in the THUD bill that is before us.

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