

Lawmakers say FAA certification of new planes needs an overhaul

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The Federal Aviation Administration outlined steps to change how it approves new passenger planes, but lawmakers said they will push ahead with legislation to change the current system that lets aircraft makers including Boeing play a key role in the certification process.

The FAA has been under pressure to change its certification process after failing to catch problems with new flight-control technology on the Boeing 737 Max. Design problems have been blamed for two crashes that killed 346 people.

For decades, the FAA has relied on employees of aircraft makers to vouch for the safe design of components on planes. Prompted by criticism of its review of the Max, the Transportation Department created a committee to review the certification process, and on Tuesday, the FAA responded to that panel's suggestions.

The FAA defended the current system as safe but identified areas for improvement. For example, the agency said it will pay more attention to how pilots might respond to new technology, a key concern because of increasing automation on jetliners.

Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., praised FAA for being willing to make some changes, "but the Congress needs to address shortfalls and problems that exist in the FAA's current oversight authority." She said the report by the Transportation Department's advisory committee "defends a system that is in clear need of improvement."

Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., chairman of the House Transportation Committee, said he will introduce legislation to change the certification process, although he didn't provide any details.

"Let's be clear," DeFazio said in a statement, "we already know the FAA's, certification process is in need of a major overhaul." He said failures in the system led to the 346 deaths.

The 737 Max has been grounded worldwide since March 2019, after the second of two crashes – one off the coast of Indonesia and another in Ethiopia. In both cases, an automated anti-stall system pushed the nose of the plane down, and pilots were unable to regain control.

For more than a year, Boeing has been working on fixes to software and computers on the plane, which would need approval by the FAA, but the task has taken far longer than the company expected.

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