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Regulators fail to set date for Boeing 737 MAX's return to service



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Boeing's 737 MAX's return to service could "drag on in time", says Michel Merluzeau of Air Insight Research.

Civil aviation regulators from around the world failed to make a determination on Thursday regarding when Boeing's 737 MAX aircraft can return to the skies after being grounded following two deadly crashes.

"The only timetable is to make sure the aircraft is safe to fly," Daniel Elwell, acting head of the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), said at the conclusion of the day-long meeting in Texas.

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with public confidence,” Mr. Elwell said, while adding that they cannot be “driven by some arbitrary timeline.”

Until the 737 MAX crashes in Ethiopia in March and Indonesia in October which left a combined 346 people dead, common practice was that air regulators would follow the assessment of the agency overseeing the model, in this case the FAA.

On Wednesday, Mr. Elwell revealed that Boeing had held off submitting a proposed software fix for review after his agency raised additional questions.

“Once we have addressed the information requests from the FAA, we will be ready to schedule a certification test flight and submit final certification documentation,” Boeing said in a statement.

Investigators have focused on the MAX’s anti-stall Maneuvering Characteristics Augmentation System in inquiries into the two deadly crashes.

Boeing last week said that the MCAS update was ready for the certification process, and US airlines were hoping that the planes could be back in the skies in time for part of the summer travel season.

But Mr. Elwell on Thursday said that the process could take one to two months or longer.

“It is all determined by what we find in our analysis of the application,” he said on CNBC.

Once Boeing submits all documentation, the FAA will conduct a test flight and detailed analysis to evaluate the safety of the software.

Richard Aboulafia, an aviation analyst at Teal Group, said that Boeing wanted to avoid having to repeat the process.

“There’s a lot at stake in terms of the first impression by the world’s regulators,” he told *AFP*.

US air carriers that operate the 737 MAX, including American Airlines, Southwest and United, have said that they hope to have the planes flying again by mid-August at the latest.

The FAA’s reputation has taken a beating since the March crash, and it has faced accusations of an overly cozy relationship with the aviation giant. Other aviation authorities now appear less likely to follow the US agency.

Michel Merluzeau of Air Insight Research, said American officials could end the 737 MAX’s grounding toward the end of summer, with authorities in other countries following suit “several months” later.

Mr. Elwell said that regulators are yet to decide on changes to pilot training once the adjustments have been approved.

The United States has differed with a number of countries on this issue, including Canada. Washington believes training on computers or tablets is sufficient for seasoned pilots but Ottawa wants to require training on flight simulators.

Transport Canada said it had “full confidence” in the FAA and its processes, but did not rule out the possibility that pilots of 737 MAX jets would be required to receive simulator training.

Nicholas Robinson, director-general of civil aviation, told Canadian media the training was a “possible option” but added it was too early to say if it would be mandatory.

The European Aviation Safety Agency, Canada and Brazil are among countries that want to conduct their own evaluations of the MCAS fix.

What China, the first country to ground the 737 MAX, will do is also an unknown given the flare-up in trade frictions with the United States.

About 60 representatives from 33 countries accepted the FAA's invitation to attend the regulators' conference in Texas.

Mr. Elwell said that the closed-door meeting involved "frank questions and a frank discussion," adding that his counterparts wanted "clarifications" on US procedures.

Regaining public trust will take time, according to opinion polls conducted by Southwest showing that many passengers are not yet ready to get back aboard a 737 MAX jet.

"Before the Boeing MAX's return to service, we need answers and transparency," the European Cockpit Association said in a statement on Thursday.

The organization, which represents 38,000 pilots from 36 countries, said it was "deeply disturbing" that the FAA and Boeing were considering a return to service while not disclosing "the many challenging questions prompted by the MAX design philosophy." Beyond Boeing's reputation, the 737 MAX crisis comes at a major financial cost, given that the plane represented 80 percent of the company's order backlog as of the end of last month.

The company, which has suspended deliveries, is only paid at the moment of delivery and will have to indemnify air carriers for losses.

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