

American Airlines CEO takes blame for maintenance errors, disrupted flights

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By TERRY MAXON and DAVE MICHAELS / The Dallas Morning News

[American Airlines](#) chairman and chief executive officer Gerard Arpey said Thursday that he is taking "personal responsibility" for the botched maintenance that has forced the carrier to cancel some 3,000 flights this week for aircraft inspections.

"I run the company," Mr. Arpey told reporters at an afternoon news conference, "so if there's any blame to be had, it is my fault, and I take full responsibility for this."

American canceled more than 930 flights Thursday as its mechanics, quality assurance inspectors and engineers worked to ensure that the carrier's fleet of 300 MD-80 jets would meet [Federal Aviation Administration](#) regulations.

The Fort Worth-based carrier canceled 570 flights for today as well, and expects the disruptions to continue into the weekend, although an airline spokesman said Saturday's cancellations should be fewer than today's.

On Tuesday, American grounded its fleet of aging MD-80s, which have an average age of more than 18 years and include some past their 25th birthday, to redo checks of the wiring harnesses in the right wheel well of the jets – only two weeks after it had performed the same inspections.

The FAA has said in recent days that its enforcement hasn't changed or become stricter. But Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, said airlines have told her they've noticed a difference.

"The standard is now being very, very rigidly enforced and leeway is being taken away," Ms. Hutchison said. "I can't say if it's good or bad. But I know that it's changed."

American's cancellations were on the tip of lawmakers' tongues Thursday when a [Senate](#) aviation subcommittee raked FAA officials for failing to provide adequate oversight of the airline industry. The hearing was scheduled after the FAA last month acknowledged a more serious problem – a breakdown in its oversight of [Southwest Airlines](#).

The Senate's hearing was in some ways more critical of FAA oversight than last week's House hearing, perhaps because the controversy produced tangible fallout in recent days: thousands of canceled flights and more angry passengers.

"Each passing day brings new questions and not answers," said Sen. Jay Rockefeller, the subcommittee's chairman.



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TOM FOX/DMN
MD-80s sat on the sidelines at [Dallas/Fort Worth International](#) Airport on Thursday, when American Airlines canceled more than 930 flights as inspections continued. The Fort Worth-based carrier has canceled 570 flights scheduled today.

Mr. Rockefeller, D-W.Va., disputed the FAA's description of the breakdown as a failure of the regional office based in Fort Worth. He suggested that FAA administrators in Washington should be fired and faulted the [White House](#) for being silent on the matter.

"The FAA is an agency spiraling downward and, I think, approaching the losing of the confidence of the American people," Mr. Rockefeller said.

Ms. Hutchison, the panel's ranking [Republican](#), seemed to suggest that the FAA has responded well to the crisis.

She pointed out that a top regional safety official, Thomas E. Stuckey, was removed from his job this week, and that the agency has proposed steps to eliminate conflicts of interest among inspectors that could compromise enforcement.

Ms. Hutchison also suggested that the problem wasn't serious enough to cause an accident.

"I do think things are bad," she said. "Worse would be if we had had a terrible accident."

Nicholas A. Sabatini, FAA associate administrator for safety, apologized for his agency's failure to police Southwest Airlines, but said evidence didn't point to more widespread problems.

In prepared testimony, Mr. Sabatini faulted Southwest for "putting thousands of passengers at risk," an allegation that the company's executive chairman, [Herb Kelleher](#), denied to House members last week.

Mr. Kelleher said the airline's [Boeing](#) 737 jets were "fail-safe" and immune to the problem that prompted the FAA's airworthiness directive – corrosion that caused an [Aloha Airlines](#) jet to rip open during flight in 1988.

Southwest faces a \$10.2 million fine for operating 46 jets that were overdue for safety inspections for fuselage cracks. An investigation later found that six of the airline's Boeing 737 jets had cracks.

Mr. Sabatini said recent troubles have shown that airlines sometimes interpret the work required by airworthiness directives in a manner that leads them astray from their intent. The FAA is simplifying the documents and offering to review the work bulletins that airlines create to satisfy new directives.

"What we learned here is there are technical interpretations, but you've got to be fully compliant," Mr. Sabatini said. "You can't just be a little compliant. That is basically what you are seeing with carriers that cancel flights."

At several moments, Mr. Sabatini defended himself against questions that attacked his competence and the FAA's effectiveness. The FAA and its oversight model have fostered the safest period in aviation history, Mr. Sabatini said.

Today, the U.S. has five to eight aviation fatalities per 100 million people who fly each year; during the mid-1990s, it was about 45 deaths per 100 million people flown.

"We didn't get here by accident. We didn't get here by happenstance. We didn't get here by good luck," Mr. Sabatini said.

One of Mr. Arpey's chief lieutenants, Dan Garton, had said Wednesday that the FAA had gone to a "greater focus on strict enforcement or strict compliance" on airworthiness directives, and that American had failed to respond. On Thursday, Mr. Arpey said the FAA has always held airlines to very high standards.

"I think the change ... is that these audits are obviously not something that was anticipated a month ago,"

he said. "That is additional surveillance on the airlines. We don't shrink from that. As we move forward, we will continue to operate with the FAA, do the inspections they require and address the issues in the best manner possible."

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