

FAA Cites Improper Repairs To Southwest Planes

Joan Lowy, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Aviation Administration proposed a \$1.1 million fine Monday against an aircraft repair station for allegedly using improper maintenance procedures to find cracks and prevent damage to the fuselages of 44 Southwest Airlines jets.

From 2007 to 2009, Aviation Technical Services Inc. of Everett, Wash., failed to fully inspect the Boeing 737-300s for metal fatigue and incorrectly installed fasteners in rivet holes that hold pieces of aircraft skin in place, the FAA said in a statement.

The purpose of the inspections and repairs was to prevent incidents like the one that occurred in April, when a hole opened in the roof of a Southwest Boeing 737 with 118 people aboard, forcing an emergency landing in Yuma, Ariz. But the FAA said the plane with the hole was not among the 44 improperly repaired planes.

Sources familiar with FAA's investigation told The Associated Press in February 2009 that 44 Southwest planes improperly repaired by Aviation Technical Services were later flown on 100,000 trips.

This is the second time in less than a year that the FAA has proposed a significant fine against Aviation Technical Services for failing to follow procedures for finding and repairing fuselage cracks in Southwest planes.

In November, FAA proposed fining the repair station \$530,000 for allegedly not properly bracing 14 planes while replacing old rivets and metal skin. The company also failed to install and monitor equipment to ensure that maximum loads did not exceed limits for the engines, wings and horizontal stabilizer locations while the aircraft were suspended in "cradles."

As they age, jets often develop tiny cracks, especially in stressed areas such as around windows. Patches are often used to shore up weak spots.

Aviation Technical Services said in a statement that it is cooperating fully with the FAA and expressed confidence in the quality of the company's work.

Southwest spokeswoman Brandy King said the airline continues to use Aviation Technical Services for its aircraft maintenance.

Southwest "holds our vendors to the highest possible standards, and we focus on assuring that all maintenance is performed in accordance with FAA and manufacturer requirements," the company said in a statement. "Southwest has made numerous enhancements to our internal procedures, as well as improvements related to oversight of our repair vendors."

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In 2009, Southwest paid a \$7.5 million settlement in response to an FAA finding that it had flown 737s two years earlier without complying with mandatory inspections for fuselage cracks. FAA had originally sought a fine of \$10.5 million, but later reduced the amount.

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