

Boeing CEO Says 787 Is 'Very Close' To Flying

Scott Mayerowitz, AP Airlines Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Boeing CEO Jim McNerney said his company is "very close" to getting its troubled 787 Dreamliner jet back flying again.

Two incidents involving batteries on 787s led the Federal Aviation Administration and regulators in other countries to ground the planes in January. Boeing is testing a redesign of the battery system.

"We have a high degree of confidence in the technical solution we are testing right now with the FAA," McNerney said at an aviation conference Thursday. "I think it will be sooner than later."

The Chicago-based company conducted a test flight with the redesigned battery Monday. McNerney expects the tests to conclude in a few days and said the data should be conclusive enough to convince regulators to let the plane fly again.

He called the grounding a "frustrating experience" but said regulators are putting safety first.

"They have the best interest of the flying public in mind," McNerney said.

McNerney has made few public comments to date about the 787 problems. Thursday's remarks came before a friendly crowd at a U.S. Chamber of Commerce aviation summit.

The 787 was just one of several topics McNerney was asked about by Thomas J. Donohue, the head of the chamber.

Regarding the economy, McNerney said: "It's sort of bumping along. Very slow growth in the United States. Not fast enough to generate job growth."

Boeing, however, is doing better than the overall economy because airlines worldwide are replacing older planes with new, more fuel efficient jets. Purchases by developing countries are particularly strong, he said.

Boeing and European rival Airbus dominate the market for commercial aircraft, but McNerney expects to someday see strong competition from Chinese aircraft manufacturers. They have the money and technology to catch up with the two leaders, the Boeing CEO said. China also has a large enough — and growing — domestic market to buy the new planes, McNerney said.

The United States faces internal problems when it comes to aviation.

"This country has an infrastructure crisis," McNerney said.

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Aviation is expected to grow in the next two decades but McNerney said not enough is being done to improve airports and air traffic control systems. Particularly, he said, the government needs to sort out funding issues surrounding a new satellite-based navigation system called NextGen.

The system promises to reduce congestion in the sky and let airlines fly more-direct routes, saving time and fuel. Airlines, however, have balked at spending the millions of dollars necessary to upgrade their cockpits until the government has upgraded its own system.

"It's going to slow down the growth in this country if we don't get ahead of this," McNerney warned.

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