

FAA must tighten aircraft inspections

by *The Detroit News*

The Federal Aviation Administration is due for an overhaul in the wake of a safety scandal over Boeing 737 jets flown by Southwest Airlines.

The airline missed required inspection for fuselage cracks on 46 airplanes. But when the error was discovered, the planes continued flying with a wink from low-level FAA officials.

Those officials not only failed to ground the jets once the problem was revealed, they apparently did not provide much oversight to catch the lack of inspection in the first place.

Inspecting for fuselage cracks is no small matter. Several FAA directives date to a 1988 accident that peeled the roof back on a jet in flight.

In the Southwest case, congressional investigators report that between June 18, 2006, and March 14, 2007, FAA inspectors allowed Southwest Airlines to keep flying 46 aircraft after the date they were due to be inspected for structural flaws in their fuselage, according to the office of Rep. James Oberstar, D-Minn. Oberstar is chair of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. The delay in fuselage inspection - the search for tiny cracks that might develop into problems - did not compromise safety, the airline said.

And after bringing the inspection oversight to the FAA's attention, the airline believed it had solved the problem to the agency's satisfaction.

But Oberstar, who suspects a cozy relationship existed between Southwest and FAA inspectors, is right to say the fine should not be the end of the incident. He plans congressional hearings April 3.

The fact that the problem ran for months before being discovered suggests trouble with Southwest inspection techniques and, more troubling, the FAA's ability to oversee them.

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