

FAA orders grounding of older Boeing 737 models

By Glen Johnson
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The government on Sunday grounded older models of the Boeing 737, the world's most popular jet, after mandatory inspections of some

aircraft found extensive wear in power lines running through their wing fuel tanks.

The order affected 15 percent of the 737s operating domestically, causing scattered flight cancellations as the business week began.

But with a typical inspection taking about six hours, the impact on the flying public Sunday apparently was minimal.

A number of flights were canceled at Philadelphia International Airport, but ticket clerks attrib-

uted most of them to the weather. The few passengers affected by inspection delays seem to take the developments in stride.

"If you have wiring problems, it's better to cancel the flights, ground the fleet," said Kevin Sagers, a 34-year-old Air National Guard pilot waiting at the Philadelphia airport for a substitute flight to Dayton, Ohio, because his own flight was delayed by a different mechanical problem on another type of aircraft. "I've seen guys die from malfunctioning airplanes, so I'd rather see it fixed than see people die."

At Reagan National, just outside Washington, Doug Clowers said his United flight to Chicago was canceled, "but they made sure they didn't mess up my plans too much. They made sure I was on the next available flight."

The emergency inspection, the broadest Federal Aviation Administration order for commercial aircraft since McDonnell-Douglas DC-10s were grounded in 1979, came three days after the FAA gave airlines up to a week to inspect their oldest 737s for signs of wear in the wiring or the pipes that carry the wires through the fuel tanks.

A recent inspection of a Continental Airlines 737 found both exposed wires and holes in the piping believed to have been caused by electrical sparks. Officials feared the mixture of fuel, air and electricity could spark an explosion such as that which downed TWA Flight 800.

By Saturday afternoon, 13 more aircraft had been inspected and mechanics found chafing in half of the bundles examined. One wiring bundle in a United Airlines 737 showed signs of sparking in one spot and a second area where the wires had been worn bare, most likely from vibration over the plane's 50,000 hours in flight.

That prompted the FAA to revise its original order, ordering all Boeing 737-100 and 737-200 series aircraft immediately out of passenger service until they could be inspected and repaired. The planes have cigar-shaped engines mounted directly under their wings. There are 179 such aircraft operated by U.S. carriers.

The FAA also ordered inspections over the next two weeks for 737s with between 40,000 and 50,000 flight hours, generally the newer generation Boeing 737-300, -400 and -500 aircraft. Those models have oval-shaped engines mounted on pylons that extend in front of the wings. There are 118 such planes in the United States and 282 worldwide.

Based on the early inspections, the FAA also allowed airlines to discontinue inspections of another set of pipes and wires leading to the aircraft's center fuel tank. In all 13 aircraft inspected, there were no signs of chafing found in that wiring.

"While we are concerned about [the inspections] and the disruption it may have on the system, the No. 1 concern of the FAA is safety," said Thomas McSweeney, the FAA's director of aircraft certification.

Boeing supported the action, which followed its own service bulletin to aircraft owners on April 24.

"We're doing everything we can to minimize any schedule disruptions to affected 737 operators and we will continue working with the FAA to monitor the inspection results and take any other action that may be advisable," said Boeing spokesman Russ Young.

The manufacturer said it was rushing repair kits to the airlines.

The National Transportation Safety Board, which investigates airline accidents, commended the FAA for taking "aggressive" action to identify and eliminate one of the dangers identified during the investigation into TWA Flight 800 — potential ignition sources that could spark a fuel tank explosion.

"The FAA is to be congratulated for its swift action," NTSB Chairman Jim Hall said in a statement Sunday.

Southwest Airlines, United and US Airways were most affected. Southwest has an all-737 fleet, though only about 35 of its aircraft were the type covered by the grounding. The inspections took three-person teams about six hours for each plane, a spokeswoman said.

United had to cancel 54 flights on Sunday as its 18 older-model planes were inspected, but the airline said it would have all the planes back in the air by Monday.

"This is not impeding our operation anywhere near the level a severe weather condition would at Denver or O'Hare," said United spokeswoman Mary Jo Holland, referring to the airline's two major hub airports.

A US Airways spokesman said his airline had to pull four planes out of service.

Investigators still do not know what caused TWA Flight 800, a Boeing 747, to explode off Long Island in July 1996. They suspect fumes in the center fuel tank were ignited by electricity. Since then, they have been examining the wiring configurations on similar planes and ordering inspections.

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