

January 11, 2024

David Calhoun
Chief Executive Officer
The Boeing Company
100 N Riverside Plaza
Chicago, IL 60606

Dear Mr. Calhoun,

We write to urge Boeing to fully cooperate with the National Transportation Safety Board's (NTSB) investigation into the terrifying incident involving Alaska Airlines' Boeing 737 Max 9 fuselage blowout and cabin depressurization. Although the investigation is in its early stages, this incident raises serious questions about Boeing's manufacturing quality control, oversight of contractors, and communications with the airlines, which may have contributed to the door plug bursting from the side of the airplane. We are fortunate that none of the 177 passengers and crew on the flight was killed or seriously injured. Confusing information about the incident is emerging, raising intense concern about the safety of our entire aviation system. We need clear and accurate answers as soon as possible.

On Friday, January 5, Alaska Airlines flight passengers and crew aboard a Boeing 737 Max 9 experienced a dangerous depressurization incident when a door plug blew off the side of the aircraft.¹ First-hand reports, video, and photos tell a terrifying story of cold air rushing into the plane, forcing passengers to utilize overhead oxygen masks. Additionally, at the moment of depressurization, the cockpit door flew open — to the surprise of the pilots.² Fortunately, the pilot and flight attendants responded perfectly, keeping passengers safe, even as deafening noise made it nearly impossible to communicate. Only ten minutes into the flight, the pilots made an emergency landing.³ Although we are grateful that nobody was seriously harmed, this incident still posed an extreme danger for everyone onboard. Had the door plug blown out of the plane at 33,000 feet — and not 16,000 feet — the outcome likely would have been much worse.

In the days since this incident, federal regulators and the airlines have jumped into action. Within a day, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) grounded all 737 Max 9 planes.⁴ The two affected U.S. carriers, Alaska Airlines and United Airlines, also grounded their entire Max 9 fleets and began inspections. Soon after, United Airlines inspection crews found loose bolts that

¹ Helmuth Rosales and Anjali Singhvi, *Why a Panel Tore Off an Alaska Airlines Jet Midair*, The New York Times (Jan. 9, 2024), https://www.markey.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/letter_to_nhtsa_on_bil_traffic_safety_-_110723pdf.pdf.

² Alex Daugherty, *Alaska flight incident reveals another feature Boeing didn't inform pilots about*, Politico (Jan. 9, 2024), <https://www.politico.com/news/2024/01/09/alaska-flight-incident-boeing-pilots-cockpit-00134515>.

³ Dominic Gates, *NTSB focus on Boeing, Spirit assembly work after Alaska Airlines blowout*, The Seattle Times (Jan. 9, 2024), <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/boeing-aerospace/ntsb-focus-on-boeing-spirit-assembly-work-after-alaska-airlines-blowout/>.

⁴ Federal Aviation Administration, *Updates on Grounding of Boeing 737 Max 9 Aircraft* (Jan. 9, 2024), <https://www.faa.gov/newsroom/updates-grounding-boeing-737-max-9-aircraft>.

hold the door plug in place, and Alaska Airlines announced that it discovered the same problem.⁵ According to initial communications by NTSB Chair Jennifer Homendy, the NTSB, too, appears focused on the manufacturing process of the bolts and installation of the door plug on these planes.⁶ The Max 9 fleet should remain grounded until we know that these planes are safe.

These findings suggest that the problem is bigger than one plane. Although there is no evidence of a systemic design flaw, Boeing's quality assurance process appears to have been unable to identify the loose bolts — a serious oversight. Even more concerning, Boeing contracts the manufacture and installation of door plugs to Spirit AeroSystems, raising questions about not only Boeing's internal quality control, but also its oversight of its contractors.⁷ Given the previous tragic crashes of Boeing 737 Max aircraft, we are deeply concerned that the loose bolts represent a systemic issue with Boeing's capabilities to manufacture safe airplanes.

Beyond the cause of this scary incident, communication between Boeing, the airlines, and the FAA regarding next steps has caused confusion. These three parties do not appear to agree on the steps necessary for the airlines to thoroughly inspect the planes. Most notably, following the reports of loose bolts from United Airlines and Alaska Airlines, Boeing released a "Multi Operator Message," with the FAA's approval, which included guidance for inspection crews to look for potential issues specifically with the door plug.⁸ Soon after, though, Boeing pulled back its Multi Operator Message to revise it with updated information. According to the FAA, Boeing was revising its message based on feedback in response to its initial communication.⁹ As of the writing of this letter, it is still unclear why Boeing pulled back its Multi Operator Message.¹⁰ Without a sufficient and clear Multi Operator Message, air carriers cannot appropriately inspect aircraft for concerns and get planes safely back in the air.

You recently acknowledged Boeing's "mistake" and pledged "100% and complete transparency" going forward.¹¹ We commend you on this statement and hope you can provide additional answers that put truth to these words. Therefore, in addition to Boeing's full cooperation with the NTSB investigation, we request a written response to the following questions by January 18, 2024:

⁵ Dominic Gates, *Alaska, United find loose hardware during inspection of 737 Max 9s*, The Seattle Times (Jan. 8, 2024) <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/boeing-aerospace/united-finds-loose-bolts-on-door-plug-when-inspecting-its-max-9s/>.

⁶ Dominic Gates, *NTSB focus on Boeing, Spirit assembly work after Alaska Airlines blowout*, The Seattle Times (Jan. 9, 2024), <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/boeing-aerospace/ntsb-focus-on-boeing-spirit-assembly-work-after-alaska-airlines-blowout/>.

⁷ Id.

⁸ Federal Aviation Administration, *Updates on Grounding of Boeing 737 Max 9 Aircraft* (Jan. 9, 2024), <https://www.faa.gov/newsroom/updates-grounding-boeing-737-max-9-aircraft>.

⁹ Id.

¹⁰ Dominic Gates, *NTSB focus on Boeing, Spirit assembly work after Alaska Airlines blowout*, The Seattle Times (Jan. 9, 2024), <https://www.seattletimes.com/business/boeing-aerospace/ntsb-focus-on-boeing-spirit-assembly-work-after-alaska-airlines-blowout/>.

¹¹ Katherine Thorbecke, *Boeing CEO acknowledges 'mistake' related to terrifying Alaska Airlines flight*, CNN (Jan. 10, 2024) <https://www.cnn.com/2024/01/09/business/boeing-safety-meeting-737-max-factory/index.html>.

1. What steps is Boeing taking to provide swift and comprehensive guidance to air carriers conducting safety inspections of 737 Max 9 aircraft?
2. Why did Boeing pull back its initial Multi Operator Message to air carriers?
3. What steps is Boeing taking to identify any safety concerns in its supply chain and manufacturing processes that may have contributed to loose bolts?
4. Is Boeing assessing its oversight of the role a contractor, Spirit AeroSystems, plays in constructing and installing door plugs?
5. Was Boeing Board of Director's Aerospace Safety Committee aware of any problems with Spirit AeroSystems' production quality? If so, what actions has it taken to resolve those issues?

Thank you for your prompt attention to this serious issue.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



J.D. Vance
United States Senator



Peter Welch
United States Senator