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## **FAA knew about problems in jets for years before groundings**

American Airlines halted many flights because of wiring

McClatchy-Tribune

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FORT WORTH, Texas -- Airline safety regulators have known for years that MD-80 airliners could have a potentially serious electrical wiring problem like the one that led to the sudden grounding of American Airlines planes last week.

But a review of Federal Aviation Administration documents indicates that the agency was in no hurry to force airlines to make fixes.

The FAA had begun the process by June 2003 to issue an airworthiness directive ordering inspections and repairs of MD-80 wiring bundles, located near the plane's main landing gear, and may have started as early as 2001, according to agency documents.

The directive didn't take effect until September 2006, when airlines were given 18 months to comply.

Years earlier, before McDonnell Douglas, the manufacturer of the MD-80, merged with Boeing, it had issued service bulletins warning airlines of the potential problem. FAA documents refer to a November 2002 Boeing service-alert bulletin that "supersedes and cancels" earlier McDonnell Douglas service bulletins.

Despite the warnings, airlines have filed few reports of serious problems with the wiring over the years.

A review by McClatchy's Fort Worth Star-Telegram newspaper of more than 24,000 MD-80 maintenance and incident reports filed by airlines with the FAA since 2000 shows only one case of chafed and burned wires in the wiring bundle in question. That occurred in August 2005 on a Delta Air Lines MD-88 while it taxied to the gate.

John Eakin, owner of Air Data Research in Helotes, Texas, did his own search of FAA records dating to the 1980s. He found five other incidents of burned, shorted or chafed electrical wiring connected to the auxiliary hydraulic pump on MD-80s or the much older DC-9 predecessors.

Eakin, who researches aircraft maintenance and safety records for lawyers and crash investigators, said there is nothing he can find in the data that suggests there was a problem that required drastic action by the FAA, such as the grounding of a fleet.

Even if there were discrepancies between the exact repair methods required by the FAA and the way they were performed by an airline such as American, Eakin said, they probably could have been fixed during regular maintenance without posing any danger.

"If I thought the airlines had screwed up, I'd be the first to criticize them," he said. "But in this case, I think it's an overreaction by the FAA."

During the lifetime of an aircraft model, which can be 30 or more years, manufacturers notify airlines, repair centres and the FAA when a problem is discovered that needs corrective action.

That notification takes the form of a service bulletin. A more urgent notice is a service-alert bulletin. Lawyers say those bulletins, even without formal FAA action, carry something akin to the force of law.

"You've got to get that done," said New York aviation lawyer Brian Alexander, a former military pilot. "To ignore that is breach of the standard of care" expected of an airline or other aircraft operator.

After a service bulletin is issued, the FAA typically goes through the process of issuing a formal, legal airworthiness directive ordering airlines to take action. It's a rule-making process that can take months. The agency typically issues dozens, even hundreds, of these directives every year for all types of aircraft. Lynn Tierney, the FAA's assistant administrator for communications, said the agency might issue 200 airworthiness directives a year.

Contrary to what American Airlines is saying, Tierney claims it was the company's decision to ground its planes.

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