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U.S.

FAA Reassigns Senior Managers in Office Overseeing Southwest Airlines

Move comes amid inquiries into allegations of lax safety enforcement



The Transportation Department's inspector general has been looking into safety issues at Southwest for many months.

PHOTO: JULIO CORTEZ/ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Andy Pasztor and Alison Sider

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The Federal Aviation Administration has removed three senior managers in the office overseeing Southwest Airlines Co. , amid allegations of lax safety enforcement raised by agency whistleblowers and various resulting government inquiries, according to people familiar with the matter.

The Transportation Department's inspector-general has been looking into some of the safety issues for many months, these people said, including lapses by the airline in documenting maintenance for more than 100 of its jets. Other parts of the probe focus on failures to reliably compute the weight of checked baggage and hazardous landing incidents in which one aircraft smacked a wingtip on the tarmac and another ran off the strip in stormy weather.

Separate congressional investigations began delving into a number of such operational and maintenance slipups by Southwest more recently, though one person familiar with the details

said those inquiries didn't have any impact on the personnel moves. The reassignments, also prompted by allegations that managers retaliated against whistleblowing safety inspectors, were revealed to FAA employees on Tuesday, these people said.

An FAA spokesman declined to comment on personnel matters, but in a statement suggested the management shake-up was tied to long-running friction and disputes inside the office stemming from various whistleblower complaints. The spokesman said the agency takes allegations regarding safety oversight and retaliation seriously while working "continuously to improve the FAA organization's overall performance to meet our critical safety mission."

"To uphold these principles, we take appropriate action as necessary," he said.

A spokeswoman for Southwest said it is cooperating fully with the inspector general's probe. "We remain absolutely confident that our maintenance procedures ensure the airworthiness of our aircraft," she said.

The employees who were reassigned include Carroll Hebert, office manager, and two of his lieutenants responsible for operations and maintenance. Mr. Hebert didn't immediately respond to an email request for comment. The three managers have been replaced on an interim basis; naming permanent replacements could take months.

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The union representing FAA safety inspectors nationwide has complained to both FAA headquarters and congressional staffers about alleged management retaliation against

inspectors who raised safety concerns, according to people familiar with the details. The union declined to comment.

The personnel shifts, which went into effect over the weekend and were announced to FAA employees in the Dallas-area office Tuesday morning, follow months of escalating controversy—some of it public—regarding the office's oversight of Southwest.

Among the issues under scrutiny by the inspector general and officials at FAA headquarters is widespread miscalculation of the total weight of checked bags loaded onto each Southwest flight, according to government officials and internal agency documents. That investigation was the subject of a previous Wall Street Journal report.

The FAA's civil probe, documents show, found systemic and significant mistakes with employee calculations and luggage-loading practices, resulting in potential discrepancies when pilots compute takeoff weights.

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While in a few cases the FAA found the load was more than 1,000 pounds in excess of what airline paperwork indicated, Southwest has said its system carries minimal risk for passengers. In the past, the carrier said it had cooperated fully with the FAA and voluntarily reports issues to enhance safety, with a Southwest spokesman calling dealings with the agency part of a “routine dialogue.” Earlier this year, the airline said it planned to phase in new baggage-counting procedures by the end of 2019.

Inspector general investigators have been gathering information and interviewing inspectors about the baggage issue and other

matters since last year, and are expected to issue a comprehensive report on FAA oversight of Southwest by early 2020, according to some of the people familiar with the process.

Officially called the FAA's certificate-management office overseeing Southwest, the same part of the agency was the focus of significant controversy more than a decade ago when congressional investigators discovered that local agency managers had allowed the airline to continue flying tens of thousands of passengers on nearly two dozen aircraft without completing mandatory structural inspections. The public furor prompted the agency and lawmakers to revamp the FAA's mission to focus solely on safety oversight, eliminating its prior responsibilities for promoting aviation.

This time, similar debates about policy and management priorities again have roiled the office, creating what one person familiar with the details called a “toxic environment,” pitting management against inspectors opposed to the agency's changing, less-punitive approach to oversight.

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