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Boeing Engineer Says Company Used Shortcuts to Fix 787 Jets

Lawyers for Boeing employee say managers dismissed quality concerns; company says issues were previously raised and addressed

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A ceremonial presentation of a Qatar Airways Boeing 787 Dreamliner in the Czech Republic this year. Boeing delivered 73 Dreamliners last year, hitting its target to deliver 70 to 80. PHOTO: MICHAELA RIHOVA/ZUMA PRESS

A veteran Boeing engineer has filed a complaint with federal regulators alleging the company dismissed quality and safety concerns during production of its troubled 787 Dreamliner jets.

Federal safety officials are investigating claims by the engineer, Sam Salehpour, that in 2021 he observed Boeing using shortcuts during the 787 assembly process that placed excessive stress on important joints and embedded drilling debris between joints on more than 1,000 planes. The errors, they say, reduce the plane's lifespan and could be difficult to detect.

"I'm doing this not because I want Boeing to fail, but because I want it to succeed and to prevent crashes from happening," Salehpour said on a call with reporters to discuss the claims.

Boeing, in a statement, said the claims are inaccurate and that the company is confident in the safety of the jets, which it says are subject to rigorous oversight from the Federal Aviation Administration. It said the issues had been previously raised and properly addressed.

"This analysis has validated that these issues do not present any safety concerns and the aircraft will maintain its service life over several decades," the company said. "We continue to monitor these issues under established regulatory protocols and encourage all employees to speak up when issues arise."

The FAA declined to comment on the complaint, which it received in January. "Voluntary reporting without fear of reprisal is a critical component in aviation safety," an FAA spokesman said. "We thoroughly investigate all reports."

The claims come as Boeing faces broader scrutiny over its quality control and manufacturing operations in the wake of a midair blowout of a door plug on an Alaska Airlines flight in January. That plane, a smaller 737 MAX, was built at Boeing's Renton, Wash., factory.

The company has struggled for years with quality of the South Carolina-built 787 Dreamliner, popular among airlines and often used on long-haul international flights.

Deliveries of the plane were largely halted for nearly two years starting in 2020 amid various production and regulatory issues. Deliveries resumed in August 2022 and were halted again the following February for a few weeks over regulatory documentation issues.

The Dreamliner, which made its debut in 2011, has a largely carbon-composite frame that reduces fuel costs, making it more economical. Also setting the plane apart is a production process in which Boeing farmed out much of the work to a global network of suppliers, making it the first of the company's planes to be designed largely by other companies.

As a quality engineer, Salehpour is responsible for investigating and analyzing defects in Boeing's production process and developing procedures to fix them, his lawyers say. They say he has four decades of experience in aerospace engineering.

In a letter his lawyers sent in January to the FAA, Salehpour claimed that in 2021 Boeing improperly addressed small gaps where the plane comes together, and that the company's internal reports show that the gaps weren't fixed at all in some sections. The problems, he said, could eventually cause the plane's fuselage to break apart.

Lawyers for Salehpour say the company hasn't demonstrated that the planes will stand up over time despite the larger gaps.

His lawyers said Salehpour was involuntarily moved off the 787 program to the 777 program after raising his concerns. He was then threatened with termination after flagging issues on the 777 to his supervisors, they said.

"These problems are the direct result of Boeing's decision in recent years to prioritize profits over safety, and a regulator in the FAA that has become too deferential to industry," attorneys Debra Katz and Lisa Banks said in a statement.

Boeing said it has determined that there is no safety concern for any planes currently in service and is in the process of determining long-term inspection and maintenance needs under FAA oversight.

Boeing said it prohibits retaliation and encourages employees to flag quality and safety issues. The company said it responded to employee concerns in 2021 and 2022 about 787 production and slowed operations to ensure the planes were being built to specification. A 787 can safely operate for more than 30 years before needing increased maintenance due to its age, the company says.

Boeing delivered 73 Dreamliners last year, hitting its target to deliver 70 to 80.

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