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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE,
AND TRANSPORTATION

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6125

WEBSITE: <https://commerce.senate.gov>

December 13, 2021

The Honorable Steve Dickson
Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20591

Dear Administrator Dickson:

I issued an Aviation Safety Whistleblower Report on December 13, 2021, detailing accounts from Federal Aviation Administration (“FAA”) and industry whistleblowers related to oversight of aviation manufacturers. I write to request that the FAA review the concerns raised by these whistleblowers, and implement necessary changes to improve safety in the aviation industry.

According to these whistleblowers, Organization Designation Authorization (“ODA”) unit members acting on behalf of the FAA, have been subject to undue pressure to approve designs that may not comply with FAA safety standards. They also allege that they have been pressured to accommodate accelerated schedule demands at the expense of the time necessary to complete a thorough review of each design or address quality issues in the supply chain, creating a risk that products will be produced that fall short of FAA safety standards. Compounding these problems, some whistleblowers allege that when designs are submitted for approval by FAA, FAA engineers who find the designs to be non-compliant have been overruled by their managers.

Other allegations highlight staffing issues. In particular, the Boeing Aviation Safety Oversight Office (“BASOO”) has been chronically understaffed, which hampers its ability to perform proper oversight of one of the world’s largest aerospace manufacturers. Because of the increased complexity of automated systems and increased competition from other industries seeking the same expertise, whistleblowers have expressed concern that both industry and FAA may be falling behind in having the necessary expertise to properly design and certify these complex systems. Furthermore, the whistleblowers believe that by moving away from a delegation system in which FAA closely monitored the performance of manufacturing employees acting on behalf of FAA individual designees to a system reliant on “systems oversight” of organizational designees, FAA’s strong safety oversight has eroded.

Together, these allegations illustrate the importance of a course correction that puts safety first and listens to the voices of line engineers. Based on these whistleblowers’ accounts, and consistent with last year’s enactment of the Aircraft Certification Safety and Accountability Act (“ACSAA”), the Committee has focused on priorities for improvement, including:

- Strengthening FAA direct oversight of the ODA program;
- Taking measures to address undue pressure at Boeing ODA;
- Ensuring sufficient FAA technical and engineering capacity for safety oversight;
- Limiting delegation to industry until human factors assumptions are validated;
- Requiring that manufacturers adopt formal safety management systems with root cause analysis followed by corrective action;
- Measuring and improving FAA safety culture for frontline staff; and
- Mandating integrated aircraft safety analysis of designs.

In recognition of the whistleblowers' important information sharing, I request that you review each allegation thoroughly, and where warranted, open an investigation to determine whether conduct is contrary to FAA's policies and procedures. Additionally, I request that you review the recommendations in the report and provide the Committee with a briefing on how FAA will address each recommendation.

The Committee expects to hold additional hearings next year in anticipation of FAA's reauthorization in 2023. I look forward to working with you to address necessary changes to improve safety in our aviation manufacturing sector.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Maria Cantwell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Maria" being larger and more prominent than the last name "Cantwell".

Maria Cantwell
Chair