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January 9, 2024

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

Dear Administrator Whitaker,

I am deeply concerned by last Friday's near catastrophe on board Alaska Airlines Flight 1282. We need a full, thorough investigation and disclosure of findings. I commend the heroic actions of the pilots and flight attendants who delivered all of the plane's passengers to safety in Portland. The Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) order to ground the Boeing 737 MAX 9 is the least that should be done. I write to demand an answer on how this incident occurred and inquire about what more the FAA is doing to ensure our skies are safe.

As we all know, Alaska Airlines Flight 1282 took off from Portland, Oregon, headed to Ontario, California, on the evening of Friday, January 5. Shortly into the flight, a mid cabin door plug separated from the plane, causing a "rapid decompression" of the plane's cabin.<sup>1</sup> Despite the gaping hole in the side of the aircraft and reported communications issue, the pilots and crew were able to return the plane and all of its passengers safely to the ground in Portland.<sup>2</sup>

Previous signs of trouble with the aircraft put the airline on notice about serious danger. This plane experienced three instances of the auto-pressurization fail light illuminating, including two in the days leading up to the incident.<sup>3</sup> Each time, Alaska Airlines crew checked and reset the light, returning the plane to service. The airline clearly knew something was wrong. It requested additional maintenance on the aircraft and, last Thursday – one day before the incident – restricted the plane to flying over land in case it needed to land quickly.<sup>4</sup> A serious question the National Transportation Safety Board's inquiry must answer is whether additional inspection and maintenance should have been done before the aircraft carried passengers anywhere.

This disturbing event is another black mark for Boeing's 737 MAX aircraft fleet and troublingly, appears to be part of a wider pattern. Since the mandatory inspections of Boeing's

<sup>1</sup> Colbi Edmonds and Rebecca Carballo, "The Frightful Minutes Aboard Flight 1282," *New York Times*, January 7, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/07/us/alaska-airlines-boeing-passengers.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Kelly Kasulis Cho, "Door plug that blew out of Boeing plane is found in Portland backyard," *Washington Post*, January 8, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2024/01/08/boeing-737-alaska-airlines-plane-door-plug/>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*; Aliza Chasan and Brian Dakss, "Door plug that blew off Alaska Airlines plane in-flight found in backyard," *CBS News*, January 8, 2024, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/faa-halts-boeing-737-max-9-aircraft-alaska-airlines-door-midflight/>.

737 MAX 9 began, United Airlines found door plug installation issues, including loose bolts, on its planes. Alaska Airlines has identified additional similar issues.<sup>5</sup>

In light of these now repeated safety concerns, I seek your assurance that information will be made available publicly before these planes are returned to service. I respectfully request a written response as well to the following questions by January 23, 2024:

1. This plane was allowed to fly after the auto-pressurization fail light illuminated three times. Was standard protocol followed in addressing the light each time? If so, what steps will the FAA take to update its current fail light response procedures?
2. How many other instances of the auto-pressurization fail light illuminating on a Boeing 737 MAX 9 have been reported?
3. The mid cabin door plug in Friday's incident was reportedly manufactured by Spirit AeroSystems.<sup>6</sup> Boeing has repeatedly run into issues with Spirit AeroSystems: it paused production on the 737 MAX 7, MAX 8, and MAX 8200 after Spirit AeroSystems used a "non-standard manufacturing process" and found holes improperly drilled on the aft pressure bulkhead.<sup>7</sup> Please describe how the FAA ensures that aircraft manufacturers and their suppliers comply with all required standards and what corrective steps are taken when noncompliance is identified.
4. On January 8, the FAA approved Boeing's instructions to inspect grounded 737 MAX 9 aircraft and return them to service.<sup>8</sup> Please describe the FAA's role in this process, including in the aircraft inspections and in validating any corrective measures taken.
5. As part of the ongoing inspections of the Boeing 737 MAX 9 fleet, how many planes have been identified to have this possible structural flaw?
6. For any planes identified in Question 5, please describe the repair that will be made to these planes before they return to service.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Richard Blumenthal  
United States Senate

CC: National Transportation Safety Board

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<sup>5</sup> Sam Sweeney and Bill Hutchinson, "United finds loose bolts on 737 Max 9 planes in wake of Alaska Airlines door plug incident," *ABC News*, January 8, 2024, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/united-finds-loose-bolts-737-max-9-planes/story?id=106204513>; "Information about Alaska Airlines Flight 1282," *Alaska Airlines*, <https://news.alaskaair.com/alaska-airlines/operations/as-1282/> (accessed January 9, 2024).

<sup>6</sup> Valerie Insinna, David Shepardson and Rajesh Kumar Singh, "United, Alaska find loose parts on 737 MAX planes, raising pressure on Boeing," *Reuters*, January 9, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/no-data-captured-alaska-airlines-737-cockpit-voice-recorder-ntsb-chair-2024-01-08/>.

<sup>7</sup> "Boeing pauses 737 Max production over issue with parts," *CBS News*, April 14, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/boeing-max-production-slowed-parts-issue/> (accessed January 9, 2024); Valerie Insinna and David Shepardson, "New Boeing 737 MAX supplier defect to delay aircraft deliveries," *Reuters*, August 24, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/new-boeing-737-max-supplier-defect-delay-aircraft-deliveries-2023-08-23/>.

<sup>8</sup> Lori Aratani and Kelly Kasulis Cho, "United finds loose bolts on Boeing jets grounded after blowout incident," *Washington Post*, January 8, 2024, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2024/01/08/boeing-737-max-inspections-begin/>.