

# FAA's grounding of the MD80

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April 13, 2008

## A PILOT'S PERSPECTIVE ON THE FAA'S ACTIONS TO GROUND THE MD80 AIRCRAFT

The airline industry has been scrutinized and criticized for decades. Recent media reports of FAA actions gives the perception that today's airlines are cutting maintenance to save costs and may be operating unsafe aircraft.

The fact is the major US airlines currently have the safest record ever recorded. Based on my 4 decades as a commercial pilot, I can confidently tell you this excellent safety record has not occurred due to FAA oversight but it has occurred in spite of the FAA! The FAA has routinely followed the industry in safety related rules opposed to leading it.

It is very common to have FAA *maintenance* inspectors with zero pilot flying time in the cockpit supposedly monitoring the performance of very experienced airline pilots. On those times there may be a FAA *pilot* inspector in the cockpit monitoring performance, it is common to find this FAA *pilot* inspector has never been qualified or even flown that type aircraft. Instead of "checking" the actual complex operations of getting an airliner from point A to B, the FAA routinely focuses on some piece of paperwork to make sure a "t" is crossed or an "i" is dotted.

The recent attack by the FAA on American and other airlines operating MD80's and forcing the grounding of over 300 aircraft not only disrupted travel plans for hundreds of thousands of travelers, it also needlessly destroyed consumer confidence. The financial cost to American will be tens of millions.

Meanwhile, in order to comply with an Airworthiness Directive [AD] that, by many accounts, was already complied with, the entire maintenance staff for American Airlines has been required to divert time away from other maintenance issues.

The questions that need to be asked are:

- If this was such a critical safety issue to require the sudden and immediate grounding of this entire fleet of aircraft for American, why did the FAA provide so much time for all MD80 operators to comply with the AD? *The Airworthiness Directive [FAA AD #RIN 2120-AA64] was issued in September, 2006 and provided 18 months for operators to complete the work.*
- Why is it that individuals from different FAA regional divisions scattered around the country were unable themselves to agree on how the -exact- specific language in the Airworthiness Directive should be interpreted?

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- If this issue of having tie wraps at -exactly- 1 inch spacing opposed to 1.2 inches was so critical to safety, where has the FAA -oversight- been for the past 2 years while these same MD80 aircraft have been sitting in hangars getting routine airline maintenance frequently located across the airport from FAA inspector's offices?
- Why, if this was such a serious safety issue, did the FAA not have any objections -until now- to billions of passengers flying back-and-forth across the US and foreign countries on over 1,000 DC9/MD80 aircraft affected by this specific Airworthiness Directive for the past 18 months?

On a regular basis, the National Transportation Safety Board, aircraft manufacturers, pilot and maintenance labor groups have submitted recommendations to the FAA to improve safety by changing rules in numerous areas from pilot rest and duty periods to the security of the aircraft to the Air Traffic Control System. In spite of these recommendations to improve safety and coming from experienced industry experts; FAA history repeatedly shows most recommendations are never put in place and those that are can take years to become official.

The recent -media show- by the FAA's sudden decision to go after America's major airlines is absurd and deserves a full Congressional investigation.

Over the past week I have discussed the MD80 Airworthiness Directive with several airline mechanics each who have over 20 years in the industry. In off the record discussions, they have all confirmed the following statement released from the American Airlines mechanics union leadership Thursday, April 10.

*"The Transport Workers Union, which represents aircraft maintenance technicians at American Airlines, put out a statement Thursday afternoon defending the quality of the AMT's work and the safety of MD-80s.*

*From TWU international vice president Dennis Burchette on Grounding of Flights at American Airlines:*

*I have spent 22 years as a mechanic and quality assurance inspector at American Airlines and I want to say unequivocally that our MD-80s are safe. This is more a compliance issue than a safety question.*

*Let's be clear -- once the wiring harness was re-routed and then covered by a protective sleeve, the chances of any safety of flight issues were minimized. This particular engineering change order first came to light almost four years ago. Since then there have been approximately ten revisions! Since the Airworthiness Directive was issued there have been at least four revisions.*

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*Hundreds of highly trained FAA award-winning technicians, the best in the business, with decades of experience, didn't simply get it wrong. These changes have been a moving target.*

*Our members have been working around the clock to get these planes up in the air as soon as possible. We take our jobs and our responsibilities seriously. Our goal is to take planes that are safe and bring them into precise compliance."*

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