

FAA Safety Oversight Of Aircraft Repairs Faulted In Report



By JOAN LOWY

WASHINGTON (AP) - The government's oversight of hundreds of domestic and overseas repair stations that service U.S. airliners is ineffective and doesn't target the factors most likely to present safety risks, the Department of Transportation's inspector general said Monday.

The Federal Aviation Administration's supposedly risk-based safety inspection system "falls short of being truly risk-based," especially for foreign repair stations, a report by the inspector general said. Among the inspector general's criticisms is that the FAA's oversight lacks the rigor needed to identify safety deficiencies and verify that problems are corrected once identified.

To save money, U.S. airlines have increasingly outsourced their aircraft repair and maintenance to repair stations in countries where labor rates are cheaper. The FAA annually inspects 559 repair stations worldwide, while aviation authorities in France, Germany and Ireland inspect another 162 stations under agreements with the U.S.

Auditors from the inspector general's office visited or contacted FAA inspection offices and 27 aircraft repair stations in the U.S., Brazil, China, New Zealand, Peru and Singapore.

"The FAA's ability to conduct effective and consistent inspections of foreign and domestic repair stations is hindered by a lack of standardized inspection processes," the report said.

Inspectors don't use a standardized checklist for conducting inspections, don't enter complete information on their inspections into FAA's inspection database, and don't effectively communicate

the results of their inspections with repair station officials afterwards, the report said. Inspectors were often vague about the problems they found, citing the safety regulation that was violated without explaining what specifically the facility was doing that violated the regulation.

"Officials from one foreign repair station were so frustrated by poor communication with its inspectors that they decided it was easier and more efficient to fly to the United States to meet with FAA for clarification and guidance," the report said.

In another case cited in the report, officials for a repair station told auditors they didn't hurry to address oversights because the FAA inspector wrote out the requested changes by hand instead of typing, therefore they assumed the changes weren't significant.

FAA inspectors are supposed to use web-based spreadsheets and other risk-assessment tools. But nearly all the inspectors interviewed by auditors said they were not trained how to use the tools, did not recall the training or regarded it as poor, the report said.

Since FAA inspectors don't have the time during inspection visits to examine in depth each area of a repair station's operations, the agency decided five years ago that inspectors would analyze data from past inspections to decide which areas deserved the most attention. However, the report said inspectors have been using only the results of the previous year's inspections to guide their decisions rather than inspections from multiple years.

One year, which probably includes only one previous inspection, isn't statistically significant, said John Goglia, an expert on aircraft maintenance. Without more years and other information that airlines have, such as the problems that may arise in planes after they've been repair, it's not possible to do a risk-based analysis, he said.

Inspectors also continued to perform inspections in areas of repair station operations where little or no risk was previously detected, the report said.

"They're just touching the surface and they're not digging deeply into anything," said Goglia, a former National Transportation Safety Board member.

Auditors also found deficiencies in 57 of 119 work orders for repair or major maintenance to airliners that they analyzed. Deficiencies included mechanics with insufficient training, tools whose calibrations were outdated, and inaccurate documentation of work orders.

"Until the agency modifies its inspection system, FAA's ineffective oversight could lead to repair stations operating contrary to federal aviation regulations and decreasing the margin of safety," the report said.

In a response included with the report, FAA officials concurred with nine recommendations made by auditors. The agency said it is also working on a new safety oversight system which it plans to begin implementing in 2015, a two-year delay from its originally planned rollout.

FAA also said that in "the near term" it will improve inspector training and guidance aimed at providing more comprehensive and standardized procedures for conducting inspections and reporting inspection findings.

Officials for the Aeronautical Repair Station Association, which represents repair facilities, said they hope the report will motivate the FAA to make the changes necessary to improve the quality of its industry oversight.

"Our association has long urged the FAA to move to a standardized approach to repair station oversight and target inspections based on risk assessments to use limited resources more efficiently," Sarah MacLeod, the association's executive director, said.

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