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FAA to order new inspections of three older Boeing 737 versions

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WASHINGTON -- The Federal Aviation Administration issued Monday an emergency safety directive calling for stepped-up structural inspections of three older versions of Boeing Co.'s workhorse 737 jetliners, in the wake of the dramatic fuselage rupture that occurred aboard a Southwest Airlines Co. flight last Friday.

The FAA ordered "initial and repetitive electromagnetic inspections for fatigue damage" of certain older Boeing 737-300, 737-400 and 737-500 models.

In addition to inspections of Southwest's fleet of about 80 Boeing 737-300s, which the airline said may be finished as early as Tuesday morning, the FAA wants operators of about 100 other older Boeing 737s worldwide to complete the same inspections.

The checks will focus on certain areas of the fuselage that in the past were not subjected to such detailed examinations.

At the same time, manufacturer Boeing said it is "preparing a service bulletin that will recommend lap-joint inspections on certain 737-300/400/500 airplanes."

The FAA's move came after inspections found cracks in the fuselages of three Southwest 737-300 aircraft that will keep them grounded "until appropriate repairs can be completed," the airline said Monday.

Southwest said it would complete inspections of its grounded Boeing 737-300s by late Tuesday after grounding part of its fleet following Friday's incident, which forced an emergency landing.

The Dallas-based discount carrier voluntarily stopped flying 79 of its oldest 737-300 models and had returned 57 to service by Monday afternoon, according to a blog post on its website.

More than 760 737-300s made by Boeing are in service, according to consulting firm Ascend Worldwide, though other carriers have not followed Southwest in grounding planes, and the manufacturer said Monday that it had not identified the need for "fleetwide action."

Southwest said in a blog update that it had canceled 70 of around 3,400 scheduled flights Monday.

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