

Southwest set to return to full schedule

Published: April 5, 2011 at 4:30 AM

DALLAS, April 5 (UPI) -- Southwest Airlines Co. said it would operate its full schedule after grounding 79 Boeing 737's after a 5-foot hole tore through the roof of one of them.

The planned service resumption Tuesday, following the cancellation of 670 flights and delay of more than 3,000 others since Friday's incident, will coincide with the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration's release of an emergency directive ordering inspections of 80 Boeing 737s in the United States due to possible lap-joint fatigue.

Lap joints hold together two metal panels of the aircraft's aluminum skin by overlapping them and then fastening them with rivets, which are supposed to be permanent. The U.S. National Transportation Safety Board said Sunday the hole on the Friday flight was caused by fatigue cracks in the aluminum underskin of the plane's lap joints.

The FAA order requires inspections using "eddy current" electromagnetic technology of specific areas of the planes' main body section to test for micro-cracks, the agency said.

Affected planes are older 737s with a high number of takeoffs and landings, the FAA said.

The agency, part of the U.S. Transportation Department, encouraged government aviation agencies in other countries to order similar inspections of some 100 other older Boeing 737s.

As of 8 p.m. CDT Monday, Southwest of Dallas found cracks in the fuselages of four 737s, spokeswoman Whitney Eichinger told United Press International.

Those planes will remain grounded until they're repaired, she said.

"We're awaiting further instruction from Boeing on how to repair these cracks," she told UPI.

Boeing Co. spokesman Miles Kotay told UPI the Chicago aerospace giant had "not given an ETA" on when it would provide the repair instruction.

Boeing earlier said it would recommend lap-joint fatigue inspections on certain older 737-300's as well as the 737-400 and 737-500 models.

Lap joints previously were not subjected to detailed examinations, The Wall Street Journal reported.

"Safety is our No. 1 priority," Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said in a statement Monday. "Last Friday's incident was very serious and could result in additional action depending on the outcome of the investigation."

Friday's incident happened at nearly 35,000 feet on a 15-year-old Boeing 737-300 carrying 118 passengers from Phoenix to Sacramento.

Passengers reported an explosion-like sound. Oxygen masks were released and at least two people passed out as the pilot guided the plane to an emergency landing at Arizona's Marine Corps Air Station Yuma. No one was seriously injured.

Southwest has 171 737-300s and is gradually replacing the fleet with newer types, expecting to receive 19 "Next Generation" 737-700 jets this year.

More than 760 Boeing 737-300s are in service around the world, aerospace consultant Ascend Worldwide said.

Germany's Deutsche Lufthansa AG, the second-largest operator of 737-300s after Southwest, said it had no plans to ground any of its aircraft because its jets have a different configuration from Southwest's models, the Journal said.

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More than 70 737-300s are flown by Air China Ltd., China Southern Airlines Co. and China Eastern Airlines Corp., Ascend said in figures cited by the Journal.

US Airways Group Inc. has 18 and Air New Zealand Ltd. has 15.

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