

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Opening Statement at November 18, 2020 Executive Session

Cantwell: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and I too want to thank you and congratulate the staff on such great bipartisan cooperation on such an important and critical issue as aviation safety. Our teams, as you have said, have worked together for many, many months now on this legislation and I too want to thank them, both from the majority staff and the minority staff, for their hard work on this. Clearly, they've spent many hours working around the clock to try to perfect, working with our members of this committee, this important legislation.

In aviation, we have to meet the highest safety standards. It's not optional, it's mandatory. And for nearly two years, this committee has worked on the investigation and underlying reasons for the Lion Air Flight 610 and Ethiopian Flight 302 crashes that took 346 lives. So that is why this legislation before us is so important. It basically is saying that we are requiring of both the FAA and manufacturers more safety assessments and more oversight. That cutting corners is not an option, but listening to frontline engineers is the most important aspect of getting this right.

The FAA will be returning to a direct oversight role of employees, supervising them and making sure that they have safety advisors overseeing them, and for ongoing communications, that both give the individual employees an ability to channel information about safety concerns, and also stronger whistleblower protections. It also requires that manufacturers will have to do more analysis about product. That helps us understand any new or novel programs that need to be looked at in further detail.

Obviously, our work and investigation and oversight caused by the MCAS system is what we are trying to correct. I want to recognize the families who have suffered unimaginable losses, but yet have come to us with a critical voice in helping us craft this legislation. And we thank them for their support today in pushing this legislation through.

I want to thank Senator Duckworth for her leadership, particularly for her work on the Advanced Reforms to Human Factors and Automation. I want to thank Senator Moran for his work on the International Pilot Training Standards, a key piece of the legislation that also Senator Duckworth worked on. And I want to thank Senator Blunt for joining me on the Air Grant Program. This program, helping us develop the technical workforce in Washington D.C., to understand this oversight responsibility, is critical. This is an industry that employs more than 2 million people and some said has 5 percent of GDP. Well, we can't afford to ever get it wrong. We need to make sure that we have the technical expertise here in evaluating the situations.

So I again thank Chairman Wicker for helping us strengthen the oversight of both the FAA and the industry, and substantially making sure that the process of going through changes, that is called the change product rule, that you cannot just do a new derivative without actually having the product analysis done as well. So, these are lots of changes that we think are very important to where we need to go with the future.

Mr. Chairman, I will establish--put into the record a longer analysis of this legislation. I do want to say, I conferred with the FAA administrator last night about his plans for today, and appreciate the hard work that everybody has done in the process of reviewing the 737 Max. But whatever actions are taken today does not alleviate our responsibility for making changes to this process and ensuring that we are going to meet the highest standards of safety possible when it comes to aviation.

I also want to note that there's a lot of oversight in this legislation for people in the future. We are going to get more technical expertise of the FAA, we're going to make sure they keep that technical expertise, and we are going to have a technical review board overlook the work that's done by the FAA. So again, any of these new or novel ideas, particularly in the area of human factors, get the time and attention and review that is necessary.

I'm glad the company, Boeing Company, has added a software engineer as the VP level for safety. As more and more of these issues move to software, we need to understand at the FAA, with a human Center of Excellence, the response that humans have to software and software innovation, but we also need more accountability and reporting from the industry as well.

So, again, I thank you Mr. Chairman, I know there's other issues on the agenda. I'll leave my comments to that unless we're still waiting for a quorum.