

FAA approves Boeing plan to fix 787 Dreamliners

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Passengers won't be allowed back on Dreamliners until the FAA is assured the new battery system works.

WASHINGTON -- The Federal Aviation Administration approved Boeing's certification plan for the 787 Dreamliner's lithium-ion battery system Tuesday and gave the company the go-ahead to test it in the air.

Boeing's plans call for redesigning the eight-cell batteries to minimize the risk of a short-circuit, which caused a fire in a Dreamliner parked in Boston on Jan. 7.

The FAA approved limited test flights for two aircraft, which will have redesigned batteries and enclosures. Testing will cover each plane's two batteries and other systems.

"This comprehensive series of tests will show us whether the proposed battery improvements will work as designed," Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said. "We won't allow the plane to return to service unless we're satisfied that the new design ensures the safety of the aircraft and its passengers."

Boeing's plans also call for better insulation of each battery's eight cells, a new fireproof shell to surround the battery and a venting system for smoke if there is a fire.

"We are confident the plan we approved today includes all the right elements to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the battery system redesign," FAA Administrator Michael Huerta said. "Today's announcement starts a testing process which will demonstrate whether the proposed fix will work as designed."

Boeing CEO Jim McNerney called FAA's approval a critical and welcome milestone toward getting the fleet flying again.

"Our top priority is the integrity of our products and the safety of the passengers and crews who fly on them," McNerney said.





Investigators at the National Transportation Safety Board traced the origin of the fire to one cell in the Boston battery. But they have spent months searching for the cause, and 500 pages of documents released Thursday drew no conclusions.

Ricardo Martinez-Cid, an aviation trial lawyer with the Miami firm Podhurst Orseck, called it heartening that Boeing developed a fix for the revolutionary plane. But he said the FAA relies heavily on manufacturers when certifying new aircraft, so he would like to see the data that justifies returning the plane to the sky and persuading travelers that the plane is safe.

"The question is, how much care and attention was given to the problem and to correcting it, before getting back out to market," Martinez-Cid said. "We know what a huge effect on the bottom line this is for Boeing. There's always going to be a degree of skepticism inherent in any fix. They should really take some extra steps in making sure that they're doing it right."

One version of the plane will be tested to demonstrate that the comprehensive changes work as intended in flight and on the ground. The tests are designed to show how the battery performs in normal and abnormal conditions.

The other plane will conduct tests on improving the engine that the company says are unrelated to the battery issue.

"We have a great deal of confidence in our solution set and the process for certifying it," said Ray Conner, president and chief executive officer of Boeing Commercial Airplanes. "Before 787s return to commercial service, our customers and their passengers want assurance that the improvements being introduced will make this great airplane even better. That's what this test program will do."

FAA and other safety regulators around the world grounded the Dreamliner fleet Jan. 16, after a second battery smoldered and forced an emergency landing in Japan.

Rep. Rick Larsen, D-Wash., called the FAA's decision a "major step" in getting the plane back in the air.

"I am confident the FAA and Boeing will continue working closely to do all that is necessary to show the planes are safe and can return to service," said Larsen, the top Democrat on the House aviation subcommittee.