

Los Angeles Times

Fumed Out

Toxic fumes seep into air on planes with alarming frequency, incapacitating pilots and seriously sickening passengers and crew. The industry and regulators say cabin air is safe but have known about the problem for decades.

For decades, the airline industry has harbored a dirty secret about flying. Toxic fumes from jet engine oil and other aviation fluids seep into the air on planes with alarming frequency. Airlines have no obligation to notify passengers of these “fume events” and have sometimes provided misleading information. A yearlong investigation by the Los Angeles Times found that hundreds of passengers and crew have been sickened in recent years and pilots have even become incapacitated while in flight.

A tip from a scientist launched reporter Kiera Feldman’s deep dive into air contamination on planes. She found that pilots and flight attendants have been trying to sound the alarm for years, reporting an array of health problems including tremors and brain damage. But they were dismissed by airlines, manufacturers and regulators, who all insisted that cabin air was safe and that the levels of any toxic chemicals were too low to cause serious harm.

Feldman found that the chemical levels during these fume events have never been measured. In 2003, Congress ordered the Federal Aviation Agency to measure the toxic chemical levels in such events, but the airlines refused to let flight attendants carry air samplers aboard. What’s more, planes are not equipped with sensors to detect air contamination. Boeing, Airbus and airlines acknowledge in internal documents and litigation filings that the industry standard is surprisingly low-tech: the smell test.

Using a massive cache of exhibits and depositions from flight attendants’ litigation against Boeing, Feldman delivered bombshell findings. Senior Boeing engineers worried that data from sensors would prove damaging in lawsuits by sick passengers and crew members. An internal Boeing memo described it as a “risk” to give air sensors to even one airline because it could be used as evidence that the devices are needed and potentially lead to new regulations.

The FAA is the industry’s regulator, but the agency doesn’t track these fume events. And airlines aren’t required to report information needed to answer basic questions: How many fume events are there? How often are crew members and passengers sickened by fumes? How many pilots have been impaired by fumes, potentially endangering everyone on board?

Given the challenging lack of data, “Fumed Out” aimed to quantify these toxic fume events that have gone ignored by the industry’s regulator. Feldman reviewed more than 900 safety reports voluntarily made by pilots and flight attendants to NASA in the past two years, finding that almost 400 passengers and crew members had received medical attention during fume events and four dozen pilots were impaired to the point where they were unable to perform their duties.

Feldman discovered that the FAA was sitting on several databases of aviation records that included airline fume reports and other mechanical problems. The agency was claiming that fume events were rare, yet no one was looking at the reports and doing a count. Aided by aviation experts, Feldman analyzed airline mechanical reports to identify fume events. Feldman filed hundreds of requests for first-aid records from airports to determine if passengers and crew were sickened. Using FAA records obtained through FOIA, she found that one airline alone, JetBlue, had more than 50 flights that were forced to make emergency landings or diversions or return to the gate because of fumes in 2019, and at least 46 people reported illnesses.

The reporting for “Fumed Out” also involved reviewing thousands of pages of court filings from workers’ compensation cases, internal airline mechanical records and other documents, and interviews with dozens of people, including pilots, flight attendants, mechanics, union officials, academic experts and medical professionals.

“Fumed Out” provided a damning portrait of how regulators and some of the most powerful companies in the world spent decades publicly downplaying a problem that threatens the health and safety of anyone who flies.

After publication in December, Feldman received no challenges or complaints from Boeing, Airbus, the airlines or the FAA. U.S. Congressman John Garamendi decried the FAA’s inaction on fume events as “unconscionable” and announced new plans for legislation that would require air sensors, mandatory reporting and other safety measures.

Unions representing crew members said they will call for Congressional hearings based on the findings of The Times’ investigation and will push for sweeping changes in the airline industry to improve reporting of these “fume events” and close regulatory loopholes, as well as requiring planes to be equipped with toxic air sensors and filters.