

Boeing aircraft with missing panel lands in Oregon

- A Monitor Desk Report

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Portland, Ore. □ A post-flight inspection revealed a damaged and partly missing external panel on the lower fuselage of an older Boeing 737-800 that had just arrived at its destination in Medford, Ore., on Friday (March 15) after flying from San Francisco, officials said.

On the underside of the aircraft just next to the landing gear, the panel was part of the fairing that covers where the wing joins the fuselage body. Only that joint was exposed.

Boeing delivered the plane □ the earlier 737 version, not a 737 MAX □ a quarter century ago.

There was no emergency. The incident was minor, not comparable to what happened Jan. 5 on the Alaska Airlines Flight 1282, when a panel came off cleanly and left a hole in the passenger cabin.

Nevertheless, with the current heightened anxiety over Boeing safety issues and with the resonance of a headline about a panel falling off in Oregon, the minor incident drew international attention as some news organizations covered it breathlessly.

United Flight 433 left San Francisco at 10:20 a.m. and landed at Rogue Valley International-Medford Airport shortly before noon, according to FlightAware. The airport's director, Amber Judd, said the plane landed safely without incident and the external panel was discovered missing during a post-flight inspection.

The airport paused operations to check the runway and airfield for debris, Judd said, and none was found.

Judd said she believed the United ground crew or pilots doing routine inspection before the next flight were the ones who noticed the missing panel.

A United Airlines spokesperson said via email that the flight was carrying 139 passengers and six crew members, and no emergency was declared because there was no indication of the damage during the flight.

"After the aircraft was parked at the gate, it was discovered to be missing an external panel," the United spokesperson said. "We'll conduct a thorough examination of the plane and perform all the needed repairs before it returns to service. We'll also conduct an investigation to better understand how this damage occurred."

According to airfleets.net, the plane made its first flight in April 1998 and was delivered to Continental Airlines in December of that year. United Airlines has operated it since Nov. 30, 2011.

Boeing said via email it would defer comment to United.

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