

“Trouble on the Tarmac”

By Reporter Susannah Frame and producer Kellie Cheadle

Alaska Airlines is the busiest carrier at Sea-Tac International Airport in Seattle and one of the most respected companies in our community. But this investigation revealed serious safety and security problems at the airline that happened after Alaska fired a large portion of its ground crew and replaced them with non-union workers. Our story prompted immediate safety changes within the company and at the airport.

Because of our story, both the Port of Seattle and the Transportation Security Administration immediately started their own investigations. The port was so concerned by our findings that literally hours after we interviewed the General Manager of Airport Operations at Sea-Tac, a committee was formed to look into the problems.

Also as a result, Alaska discovered a massive flaw in their security procedures. A company-wide security review revealed 257 other former employees still had working security badges that gave them access to runways and planes. All of them were deactivated. Menzies also discovered the same security lapse at two other airports where they provide service. After these findings, the port assigned 11 specialists to investigate security protocols with every company that does business at Sea-Tac.

Not even a month after our story aired, the worst scenario that the expert in our story warned could happen came true. An Alaska Airlines ramp worker ran into an airplane with a cargo loader minutes before takeoff, but didn't report it. At 26,000 feet in the air, a hole a foot long and six inches wide near the cargo door, forced the jet to take a nose-dive. Oxygen masks were deployed throughout the cabin, passengers were terrified. Fortunately the plane landed safely. Our investigation was quoted and referred to by media outlets across the country as the story that first exposed problems with the contract ground workers.