

SCRAP 'ATTACK'

This American Airlines jet's right engine spewed metal over Queens. A pilot's rep is complaining of deferred safety checks.

Runway junk in jet's Qns. shard shower

By BILL SANDERSON

A hunk of runway debris apparently got sucked into the engine of an American Airlines jet that became crippled after takeoff from La Guardia and rained debris down on a Queens neighborhood, airline officials said yesterday.

The damage to the right engine of the MD-83 in Wednesday morning's incident was "consistent" with other cases in which jet engines sucked in foreign objects, said AA spokesman Tim Smith.

"That doesn't mean it was something on the runway at La Guardia," said Smith. "It might have happened on a previous flight, or on landing.

"But it looks a lot like other ingestion incidents that we've seen before."

American does not suspect a bird strike. The jet's crew saw no birds as they took off, and the damage doesn't line up with how bird strikes affect engines, Smith said.

A flock of Canada geese is blamed in the Jan. 15 ditching of a US Airways jet in the Hudson River.

Runway scraps can be disastrous. A piece of metal on a runway in Paris breached a fuel tank on an Air France Concorde in July 2000, leading to a fiery crash that killed 109 aboard and four people on the ground.

In Wednesday's incident, the plane safely landed at Kennedy Airport with 88 passengers and five crew members.

Airline engineers won't know for sure what shut down the engine until they take it apart.

In such incidents, debris will sometimes strike a fan blade at the front of an engine. "That can start things in motion," Smith said.

The initial damage might not prevent an engine from running — but can lead to problems.

Soon after takeoff at 8:15 a.m., the Chicago-bound jet's right engine spewed shrapnel over College Point, Queens, breaking some car windshields and damaging the roof of a plumbing business.

Some pilots flying that jet in recent weeks had complained about a possible fuel-flow problem in the engines, but the airline says that in that case it was a problem with an instrument and not the engine. "It's not a safety-of-flight issue," the airline spokesman said.

American Airlines pilots say engine problems with the MD-80 series are on the rise, and the recent trouble is further proof that the carrier's maintenance has gotten more lax since

2001.

"They defer things. Things that used to be done every 24 hours or every 36 hours are now being done every 48 hours or 72 hours," said Sam Mayer, a New York-based MD-80 pilot and an official with AA's pilots union.

The airline denies cutting back on maintenance, which it says exceeds industry standards.

Meanwhile, airlines will continue flying Boeing 777 jets with Rolls-Royce engines on long-distance flights despite a National Transportation Safety Board warning this week that ice can block their fuel lines and cause sudden engine shutdowns.

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