



A bold voice for transportation workers

UPHOLDING PILOT TRAINING, QUALIFICATION, AND EXPERIENCE REQUIREMENTS AND STRENGTHENING AVIATION SAFETY

The years leading up to 2010 were a challenging time for commercial aviation. The industry had suffered from four high profile fatal airline crashes in six years, the most recent on February 12, 2009, when a Colgan Air regional flight crashed in Clarence, NY, killing all of the passengers and crew on board plus one person on the ground. It is often said in Washington that it takes a terrible tragedy to foment real change. In this case Congress and the FAA undertook a thorough review of these accidents as well as others from the previous decade, and the investigation exposed serious deficiencies in airline pilot experience, qualification and training requirements. In response to these accidents, Congress unanimously passed the Airline Safety and FAA Extension Act of 2010, which, among other things, mandated new pilot experience, training and qualification requirements. Now, not even ten years since this law was passed, special interests in Washington are seeking to roll back this important safety legislation and the resulting safety regulations. It is imperative that Congress put the safety of passengers and aviation workers first and reject the calls to weaken these rules.

The requirements in the 2010 law were based in part on the principle that there is no adequate substitute for flight experience when it comes to developing sound pilot judgement and decision making. Coupled with extensive flight training under various circumstances, this gives pilots the knowledge and experience to be able to handle various weather conditions, technical malfunctions and other variables that are crucial to a safe and secure flight. The law set forth requirements for new-hire first officers to have more experience and meet safer training and qualification standards. The resulting collection of regulations covered minimum training and qualifications in a range of areas, including flight in adverse weather and icing, stall recognition and avoidance, aircraft handling, crewmember mentoring, and an overhaul of the basic air transport pilot certificate requirements and type ratings.

The results speak for themselves. Since the new regulations were implemented there has not been a single airline passenger fatality in part 121 air carrier operations. In the two preceding decades there were more than 1,100 passenger fatalities. This is government regulation at its best. A problem was studied, causes were identified, and the resulting laws and regulations have made pilots, flight attendants, and passengers safer.

Which is why it is so disheartening that some special interest groups and lawmakers have been aggressively trying to disband these safety requirements. In June of this year the Senate Commerce Committee adopted – by straight party lines – an amendment by Chairman John Thune to the Senate FAA Reauthorization Act that would weaken the pilot training and qualification requirements. This amendment must be stripped from the bill before it moves forward in the Senate.

So why, given the track record of success since the training rules were adopted, is there any appetite for weakening them? As with most things, the answer comes down to money. Robust training requirements have cut into the bottom line of some regional air carriers who would prefer to rush recently licensed and relatively inexperienced pilots into action. Such pilots could be willing to work for lower wages, as was demonstrated when airlines were hiring pilots with as few as 250 hours flight time. What's worse, is they are calling for changes under the guise that the pilot experience and training requirements have created a so-called pilot shortage. Unfortunately for them, the facts do not back this up. According to the FAA, the U.S. pilot market is currently over-saturated, with more fully qualified pilots than positions available. It is important to have a strong future supply of fully trained, fairly compensated pilots ready to meet a growing demand for air travel. But weakening important safety regulations will do nothing but make commercial aviation less safe.

As noted earlier; real, substantive, and effective safety reforms are often only achievable when we have seen tragic consequences of inaction. This is a disappointing reality. But it is more disappointing when those same tragic consequences are forgotten, ignored or discarded in pursuit of profits or deregulation. Transportation labor will always prioritize safety in our transportation network, and we will fight against those who seek to weaken safety regulations. We urge Congress to reject these efforts to weaken the flight experience and training requirements, and instead help build on the seven-plus years of safe operations we have seen since 2010.

Policy Statement No. F17-06
Adopted November 9, 2017