

Transportation Labor Opposes Initiatives to Reduce the Required Number of Pilots on the Flight Deck of Commercial Airliners

Airline pilots have spent decades focused on making airline operations the safest and most secure form of transportation in the world. Airline pilots work with stakeholders routinely to make commercial air transportation safer through improved training and human factors, enhanced technology, advancements in crew resource management, and the creation of positive safety culture. Today, some aircraft manufacturers, airlines, as well as regulators charged with airline safety oversight are actively working to reduce the required number of pilots at the controls of an airliner, otherwise known as Reduced Crew Operations (RCO).

This ongoing pursuit of reduced-crew, single-pilot, or remotely piloted operations in commercial airline operations presents one of the most significant challenges to the safety and security of the air transportation system. The RCO initiative—motivated by economics, not safety—is deeply concerning and dangerous. RCO will introduce unacceptable, needless, and avoidable risk to passengers, pilots, and airline operations. RCO threatens airline safety worldwide.

The administration should maintain the minimum pilot staffing levels as required by regulation, including 14 CFR 121.385, and aggressively advocate for at least two pilots on every flight deck here at home and in international forums. Congress should further codify the safety necessity of at least two well-trained and qualified pilots on the flight deck of every airliner.

Reduced Crew Operations

RCO reduces the number of pilots required to be on the flight deck, either during certain phases of flight, or by eliminating a pilot from the aircraft and substituting that pilot with a remotely located second pilot. The economically motivated premise behind RCO falsely asserts that due to improvements in automation and technology, the second pilot can be eliminated from the flight deck. Research does not exist to substantiate these claims and numerous safety and security issues associated with the premise have been identified. However, profit and other financial motivations are driving a perceived view that substantial cost savings can be realized with this flawed, and ultimately dangerous, approach to airline operations and safety.

Risks Associated with RCO

There are numerous risks associated with RCO that have no solution or mitigation. Some stem from an increased workload for the remaining pilot onboard, while others originate from the elimination of critical layers of monitoring, cross-checking, and operating redundancy provided by a second pilot on the flight deck. Every aspect of airline flight safety is deliberately designed for a team approach with shared responsibilities between pilots working together. Division of labor includes flying the aircraft, monitoring flight operations, managing automation, troubleshooting, and mitigating the risks that arise in a complex and dynamic environment. This redundancy is designed into every system in use today on commercial airliners not only to share workload during normal operations, but also to cooperatively resolve a malfunction or inoperative system. Evidence, including more than a decade of study by the National Aeronautics and Space

Administration and the Federal Aviation Administration, shows that the risks and challenges associated with single-pilot operations far outweigh any potential benefits.

Role of Automation and RCO

Technology and automated systems continue to advance and are vital tools that provide pilots with enhanced capabilities to monitor and control a complex and dynamic operating environment. However, automation is no replacement for the skills and experience possessed by the two or more pilots who are required to be on the flight deck and at the controls at all times. In fact, automation requires human oversight and management to function correctly and safely.

Complex decision-making and the contingency responses that are necessary to ensure flight safety require two or more pilots on the flight deck. For this reason, it's imperative that any further development of automation be focused solely on the goal of enhancing flight safety and supporting at least two pilots at the controls at all times.

Why Two Pilots at the Controls Are Essential

On every flight, airline pilots mitigate safety, security, and operational risks by adapting to changes in circumstances based on situational awareness and experience. These changes in circumstances might result from any number of factors, including clearances from air traffic control, changing weather conditions, equipment malfunctions and anomalies, airport congestion, and flight diversions, as well as in-flight passenger and cargo issues such as medical emergencies, passenger disturbances and turbulence.

In a situation in which one pilot becomes incapacitated on the flightdeck, the other pilot must quickly assume control of the aircraft. A prerequisite for this is the ability of both pilots to share a common situational awareness so that either pilot can quickly adapt to the complexities of a demanding and dynamic environment. Proposed automated solutions do not provide the same margin of safety and security as does having a second rested, qualified, and well-trained pilot physically present on the flight deck at all times.

In the final analysis, arguments for the benefits of RCO are unsubstantiated and based solely upon economic motivations. History has shown that focusing on economic gains as the primary goal tends to have a detrimental effect on safety. The safe transport of our passengers and cargo is our greatest responsibility and one that we cannot compromise.

Policy Statement No. S24-08