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Proposed co-pilot training change draws fire

Supporters say the issue is quality, not quantity



Marty Lenss



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The Gazette

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hours was implemented by Congress after the last fatal crash of a U.S. passenger airline in 2009.

Co-pilots previously qualified with 250 hours of flight time. That still is the minimum requirement for pilots at foreign airlines flying into the this country.

Jul 10, 2017 at 5:27 pm | [Print View](#)

Legislation to reduce minimum training requirements for the nation's airline co-pilots is drawing fire from air safety advocates at the same time as it's gaining support from regional airlines and small community airports that face potential loss of air service due to pilot shortages.

In 2010, Congress passed legislation requiring airline co-pilots, also known as first officers, to receive the same 1,500 hours of flight time as captains. The 1,500 hours of minimum cockpit

But U.S. Sen. John Thune, R-S.D., has said the goal of his provision added to broader Federal Aviation Administration legislation by a narrowly divided Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee is to provide better quality training rather than a quantity of flying hours.

“The amendment would allow prospective pilots to receive credit toward flight-hour requirements if taking structured and disciplined training courses, if completion of those training courses will enhance safety more than an unstructured accumulation of flight hours,” Thune said when he introduced the legislation.

Among those opposing Thune’s bill is Sen. Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., a former Army combat pilot, who says watching videos in a hotel ballroom can’t replace flying experience.

Duckworth tried to block the provision when it came to a committee vote in late June, but lost on a 14-13 vote. The committee then adopted the provision by voice vote.

Lawmakers agreed to try to negotiate a compromise before the legislation reaches the Senate floor because Minority Leader Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., has threatened to block the entire FAA bill if the provision is included.

Marty Lenss, director of the Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids, said four-year graduates of the University of Dubuque or the University of North Dakota have accumulated 1,000 hours of training, but need to pick up the additional 500 hours to qualify as for employment as co-pilots.

“When they graduate, they are at peak efficiency in terms of flight and cockpit-resource management training,” Lenss said. “Then they will go off with a flight instructor and do the same repetitive type of flying to get to the magical 1,500 hours.

“They can get that flying banners along the coast of Florida in a single-engine Cessna.”

Industry consultant William Swelbar, executive vice president of InterVISTAS Consulting of Washington, D.C., contends the 1,500-hour requirement does not translate to quality training.

“The airlines are having to do a significant amount of training once pilots come with 1,500 hours because they have been flying single-engine, unsophisticated airplanes,” Swelbar said Monday. “It’s not the quantity of the hours, despite what those on the other side of the issue will say. It really does have to do with the quality of the training.”

Regional airlines, which provide about half the country’s flights, argue that the 1,500 hours of flight time make it difficult to find qualified pilots. It can cost about \$150,000 and as long as four to six years to become a trained, qualified pilot.

Swelbar said flights to smaller communities are jeopardized if airlines can’t find pilots to fly the planes.

“Smaller community air service is being regulated out of existence,” he said. “In the late 1990s, the industry began phasing out 19- to 30-seat aircraft. Now we have a rule that is significantly affecting the 50-seat market of the business.

“One by one, these regulations are having a detrimental impact on small community air service.”

Lenss said 272 airports nationwide rely on aircraft with 50 or fewer seats. He said many smaller airports in Iowa fall into that category, making the state particularly at risk of losing some air service.

The Air Line Pilots Association, a union representing 57,000 pilots, contend the “pilot shortage” would be alleviated if regional airlines paid more to starting pilots.

An ALPA news release in August 2016 included a sampling of estimated first-year pilot base salaries exclusive of any bonuses, with Mesa Airlines offering an average \$20,183, according to the union, while Great Lakes was listed at \$29,484. Between them were the three wholly owned American Airlines subsidiaries — PSA at \$22,104, Envoy Air at \$23,256 and Piedmont Airlines at \$26,422.

Faye Malarkey Black, president of the Regional Airline Association, said pilot salaries are largely determined through collective bargaining between the carriers and their pilot negotiating committees, which tend to be dominated by captains.

Black said the collective bargaining process has incorporated some innovative ideas to include first officers.

“In many cases where an airline wasn’t able to secure the boost through the collective bargaining process for that first-year first officer, they’ve offered bonuses,” she said.

Even with the higher rates of pay for incoming pilots, Black said regional airlines were able to fill only 64 percent of new pilot quotas in 2016. She said airlines are poaching pilots from other carriers as a traditional source of trained pilots — the nation’s armed services — have stepped up paying retention bonuses.

The Eastern Iowa Airport’s Lenss is optimistic that Thune’s amendment will survive a vote by the full Senate, despite Schumer’s threat to block the entire FAA bill.

“I will be making a trip Washington, D.C., at the end of July for a meeting of airport executives,” he said. “I am optimistic that (Iowa’s) Sen. Chuck Grassley and Sen. Joni Ernst will get onboard and support Sen. Thune’s amendment.”

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