

ORAL TESTIMONY OF  
CAPTAIN JOHN PRATER, PRESIDENT  
AIR LINE PILOTS ASSOCIATION, INTERNATIONAL  
BEFORE THE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION  
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
SEPTEMBER 23, 2009

“THE FAA’S CALL TO ACTION ON AIRLINE SAFETY AND PILOT TRAINING”

Good morning Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Petri, and members of the Committee.

You may recall that ALPA testified before this committee on June 11th. At that time, we described the economic reality that has set the stage for many of the safety issues we are discussing today.

Code-share and fee-for-departure agreements mean that mainline carriers exert enormous pressure on regional airlines to provide their flight operations as cheaply as possible.

What do many airlines do to win this “race to the bottom”?

They replace experienced pilots with low-experience pilots who fly for low-paying operators marketed under the mainline brand. They consider short-staffing to be standard practice, and pilot pushing is the result. Fewer pilots flying more days compromises safety.

With the industry’s intense focus on the lowest possible operating costs and the practice of airlines outsourcing their routes to the lowest bidder, I would like to review our observations following the FAA’s 12 Call to Action meetings.

I led a dozen ALPA representatives at the FAA's industry summit on June 15. I served as the pilot moderator at the inaugural Call to Action. ALPA provided pilot moderators at meetings in six other cities, and nearly 70 of our pilots participated in these 12 events.

I would like to offer examples of ALPA's actions that illustrate our union's commitment to assist the industry in recognizing the serious safety issues raised during these meetings.

ALPA's Code of Ethics, adopted in 1956, provides standards of conduct for airline pilots. I have directed the leaders of our 36 pilot groups to work with their managements to do even more to incorporate our Code of Ethics into initial and recurrent training.

Nearly all ALPA-represented pilot groups have Professional Standards Committees charged with maintaining the highest degree of professional conduct. Where managements support them, professional standards committees enhance safety. Unfortunately, we continue to see managements that refuse to allow their pilots to participate in ALPA's professional standards and safety efforts.

Today, ALPA is releasing a new white paper on pilot candidate screening, hiring, training, and mentoring.

Our union is creating a Professional Development Committee to enhance our work with aviation colleges to foster professionalism in new pilots.

On a related issue, nearly all of ALPA's airlines have an ASAP program and about half have a FOQA program. ALPA has worked to help airlines establish these critical initiatives to detect and resolve safety issues before accidents occur.

Sadly, we continue to encounter managements, and sometimes even FAA inspectors, who remain convinced that the way to deal with safety issues is to punish employees for their mistakes. I've said it before and I'll say it again: ASAP and FOQA programs will fail if they are used for discipline, rather than as intended, to advance safety.

Based on our extensive participation, we feel the Call to Action meetings identified the best--and certainly some of the worst--practices in our industry.

But what has changed? The "action" we believe to be absolutely essential from the regulated parties and the agency was noticeably absent.

Clearly, the voluntary programs that are working need to be supported; many of the best practices must be mandated; and the worst practices must be eliminated through regulatory or legislative action.

For just one example, look to recent news headlines exposing onerous sick leave and fatigue policies at some of our regional airlines.

Despite hearings earlier this year substantiating this egregious behavior, our members continue to present evidence that some of these companies haven't changed. They continue to punish pilots who call in too sick or too fatigued to fly.

In fact, approximately one-third of the pilots at one airline are reprimanded for sick leave or fatigue-related absences annually. This shocking number illustrates the flaws in the staffing and scheduling practices at too many airlines and demonstrates the urgent need to update the archaic flight and duty time regulations that continue to allow these unsafe practices to exist.

Mainline management often refuses to intervene, despite the fact that these other airlines carry their passengers. The managements at the name brand airlines that sell the tickets to the traveling public and should be held responsible refuse to intervene – saying that these “vendor” airlines meet FAA standards.

As part of my commitment to the Administrator’s Call to Action, I am reaching out to every CEO of mainline and regional airlines to ask if each will work with ALPA to address the safety issues raised at these events.

Safety requires the investment of both time and money. The “race to the bottom” fails to deliver the safest possible service across the entire network.

We urge Congress to act swiftly to pass this Committee’s bill, HR 3371, into law.

Thank you.