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Regional Airlines May Face Pilot Shortage as U.S. Tightens Training Rules

By John Hughes - Jul 30, 2010

U.S. regional airlines may have a tougher time hiring pilots under legislation passed by Congress mandating at least 1,500 hours of flying, six times higher than now required.

“It could stymie the growth and the income potential of some of the regional airlines,” said [Jerry Glass](#), president of F&H Solutions Group, a labor-relations consulting firm in Washington. “If you can’t find pilots that meet this new, higher threshold, then you can’t grow your company.”

The U.S. Senate today cleared and sent to President [Barack Obama](#) the legislation boosting the minimum-experience requirement from the current 250 hours. The House acted yesterday, with lawmakers saying they were prompted by a crash of a plane operated by [Pinnacle Airlines Corp.](#)’s Colgan unit, which killed 50 people last year near Buffalo, New York.

The experience requirement, while boosting safety, may unintentionally make hiring more difficult during a transition, said [Kit Darby](#), a retired United Airlines pilot who runs KitDarby.com Aviation Consulting LLC.

“It interrupts the normal flow of new pilots into the business by setting a new, dramatically higher experience level,” said Darby, whose firm is in Peachtree City, Georgia. “It will take time for current pilots in training to develop that experience.”

U.S. carriers have three years to meet the conditions. The Federal Aviation Administration can let pilots fly with less than 1,500 hours should it conclude that academic training “will enhance safety more” than flying experience, according to the legislation.

Regional Pledge

The [Regional Airline Association](#), which represents commuter carriers, looks “forward to continuing our efforts with the FAA” to build upon safety, [Roger Cohen](#), the Washington group’s president, said today in a statement.

The group represents carriers such as Memphis, Tennessee- based Pinnacle, Indianapolis-based Republic Airways Holdings Inc. and [SkyWest Inc.](#) of St. George, Utah.

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The requirement may raise costs for carriers because experienced pilots generally earn higher wages, said [William Swelbar](#), a research engineer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who specializes in airline economics.

The requirement could reduce the incentive for large carriers to continue shifting flights to regional partners that typically have lower operating costs, Swelbar said.

The National Transportation Safety Board said this year that Colgan Captain Marvin Renslow, who was making the flight on behalf of [Continental Airlines Inc.](#), caused the crash near Buffalo by incorrectly responding to a stall warning in the cockpit. He died along with all passengers, crew and a person on the ground.

Relatives Lobby

Renslow and co-pilot Rebecca Shaw each had more than 1,500 hours of experience when the plane crashed. Renslow, 47, had 3,379 hours and Shaw, 24, had 2,244, according to the NTSB.

Pilot union advocates said the crash showed a need for higher experience requirements, and relatives of victims of the Colgan accident made more than 30 trips to Washington to push for a change.

If the pilots were more seasoned when they were hired, they may have avoided pitfalls that led to the crash, Paul Onorato, president of the Coalition of Airline Pilots Associations, has said. Onorato said neither pilot had 1,500 hours of experience when they were hired.

Large carriers' hiring won't be affected by the change, because job openings must first be offered to furloughed workers who already meet the experience requirement, F&H's Glass said.

Job Cuts

More than 10,000 pilots, a fifth of the workers, lost jobs at nine U.S. carriers from 2000 to 2008, as [UAL Corp.](#)'s United Airlines, [Delta Air Lines Inc.](#) and [US Airways Group Inc.](#) went through bankruptcy, according to the [Air Line Pilots Association](#) union.

Larger airlines "remain fully committed to improving the safest air transportation system in the world," [James May](#), president of the Air Transport Association trade group in Washington, said in a statement.

The pilot-safety bill also extends through September the law authorizing financing for the FAA. House and Senate lawmakers are putting off for now resolving disagreements that have stalled a longer-term FAA bill. Congress is almost three years overdue in renewing the FAA authorization.

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