

Air safety agency proposes new limits on flight duty (EASA)



Europe's aviation safety regulator today (1 October) recommended 30 new regulations that agency officials say would make flying safer but acknowledged would not make either airlines or trade unions happy.

The proposed changes to a 2008 EU regulation deal broadly with the hours pilots and flight crews can work. The results cap three years of studies by the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA), which was under pressure from struggling airlines for flexibility and trade unions for tougher limits on duty hours.

"If I were to tell you that our proposals will make everybody happy, I would be wrong," Jean-Marc Cluzeau, the head of flight safety standards at EASA, told a news conference in Brussels.

Amongst its main recommendations, EASA calls for reducing the time pilots can be on duty if their shift involves nighttime flying from 11 hours and 45 minutes to 11 hours, with a nine-hour cap if duty time involve multiple take-offs and landings that occur at night.

The recommendations also prescribe additional weekly rest times for pilots who have worked "disruptive schedules" - such as those involving periods of long flight delays or multiple start times. And the proposals would ban the growing practice of reserving an economy-class seat for pilots to rest during long-haul flights amid complaints that the practice contributes to fatigue.

A commission official welcomed the proposals and said they would be reviewed in the next few weeks.

"Implementing EASA's proposals should result in a significant improvement in safety across the EU as a whole," said Matthew

Baldwin, head of air transport the Commission's transport directorate.

But he admitted that the recommendations are under fire for not being rigorous enough in capping duty times.

"Some stakeholders are already indicating that they are not fully satisfied with the EASA's proposals and they of course will be making their views public," Baldwin said, adding: "All I can usefully say at this stage is that we in Commission will listen with great care to each and every view that is presented to us."

Turbulent year for airlines

With European passenger airlines on course for a loss-making year, airlines have pressed for more flexibility in work rules to control additional staff costs, such as when extra flight and cabin crews must be called in during peak congestion or inclement weather because pilots were nearing maximum flying times. Pilots operating in the EU can now be on duty 13 hours during the day and 11 hours and 45 minutes at night, though airlines can request they work additional time and the flight captain can add extend crew shifts if long delays are expected.

Trade unions representing pilots and cabin crews have pressed EASA to impose far tougher limits on work hours, citing safety concerns about cockpit fatigue.

Philip von Schöppenthau, secretary-general of the European Cockpits Association, told EurActiv recently that the pilots were adamant in holding out for a 10-hour cap on nighttime duty, an hour less than what EASA proposes, and sees little room for middle ground.

The night restrictions are of particular concern, with studies showing the likelihood of accidents rising sharply the longer a pilot spends at the controls.

In November 2008, a study submitted to EASA by Mobeus Aviation consultancy in Zürich argued that pilots can lose awareness after 10 hours and recommended flight duty periods for crew "should not exceed 10 hours overnight."

The draft standards for flight crews follow what EASA officials said was a vigorous review of dozens of safety studies and medical assessments, as well as analysis of material provided by national aviation safety agencies.

EASA is proposing an 11-hour standard for duty starting times between 5 p.m. and 4:59 a.m. The EASA recommendation also removes the possibility of one-hour extensions for night duty. Most airlines already operate under restrictions carved out in trade union contracts that are far stricter than either EASA or national safety policies.

Next steps:

End of 2012: European Commission to consider the EASA recommendations and present a legislative package to the European Parliament and Council.

Mid-2013: Revisions to the 2008 regulation on flight safety expected to be adopted into law

Mid-2015: Full implementation of new rules

<http://www.euractiv.com/transport/air-safety-agency-proposes-new-l-news-515104>