Industry Urges Study To Highlight Pilot Shortage

As the first wave of age 65 pilot retirements begins this month, a coalition of industry, academic and government officials are pushing for an in-depth study to highlight what they fear is a looming pilot shortage.

The coalition - an informal group that has met periodically over the past 18 months - asked the Government Accountability Office (GAO) to conduct the study, saying, "The aviation industry is entering an era of unprecedented pilot staffing challenges as a result of a struggling economy, bankruptcies, mergers, increasing flight training costs, manufacturing declines and numerous new public laws and regulations."

The organizations met with GAO late last month to discuss the need to look at the potential for a pilot shortage and ramifications to the industry. The organizations then followed with a formal pilot study proposal outlining all the factors that such a study should entail. Typically such study requests come directly from Congress, but GAO has the authority to initiate a study without such a request.

The coalition comprises a range of airline, general aviation, business aviation and academic representatives. But it also includes Flight Standards Director John Allen, who has made the potential pilot shortage one of his personal priorities.

Allen told Aviation Week last summer he believed that first they must determine that there is a potential crisis and that the issue should be studied. "We have to understand whether it will be a problem," Allen had said, noting that the agency was sensitive to past claims of shortages that haven't surfaced.

However, a number of factors are combining to suggest that the problem is looming this time, he said. Airlines are bracing for substantial retirements as the first wave of age 65 retirements begin. The military supply of trained pilots has slowed substantially. And new rules mandated by Congress for all Part 121 pilots to obtain a air transport pilot certificate are further exacerbating the

potential shortage, industry officials believe. Boeing, a member of the coalition, has suggested that the industry will need about 4,000 new pilots each year.

In its proposal to GAO, the coalition notes that the industry is facing "unprecedented pilot attrition rates coupled with diminished pilot availability caused by a decline of new entrants into the profession and a dramatic reduction in the availability of military trained pilots that have been a primary source of airline pilots since World War II."

Metrics are showing declines in nearly all sectors, from the number of commercial pilots, general aviation active pilots and new pilot starts. The number of new private pilots has dropped by 10,000 each in the past couple of years, the coalition says.

"As the airlines hire the few qualified pilots available, a lack of pilots would severely impact corporate and charter operations of general aviation," the coalition says, adding, "With few pilots choosing to enter the field of aviation as a career, universities and flight training providers will see a continued drop in enrollment." A University of North Dakota study has tracked the flight training declines, the groups say.

"Available data suggests that the consequences of an inadequate pilot supply are potentially disruptive and harmful to not only the aviation industry but to local, national and global economies," the groups say, adding this could lead to disrupted service to smaller communities.

The coalition believes a study needs to determine how severe a pilot shortage could be, how long would it last, what sector would be affected first, and what are the safety and economic impacts.

The study should look at both supply and demand side, including pilot graduates, financial support, public laws and regulations affecting training, airline pilot retirements, global pilot demand, training capacity and fleet growth.

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