

Many Airlines Go Radio Silent on Pilot Fatigue: Study

When a Congress-backed committee attempted to gather data on pilot commutes and dangerous fatigue, dozens of airlines failed to respond, according to a study released today by the National Research Council.

The report concluded that pilot commutes could contribute to fatigue that may endanger passengers, but there was not enough data to support strict regulation.

Although the report was sponsored by the Federal Aviation Administration, when the NRC asked 84 airlines, from major passenger carriers to regional and cargo airlines, to provide data on their pilots' commute and fatigue policies, only 33 airlines responded at all and only some of those answered, or could answer, all of the questions they were asked.

"The problem is that we just don't know what proportion of pilots are commuting in an irresponsible manner," said Clint Oster, chairman of the research committee. "For whatever reason, I don't think [airlines] know the commuting patterns of their pilots because they have never had a reason to collect it."

Six unidentified airlines did directly address the issue of problematic commuting causing fatigue -- three said it "never" significantly affects a pilot's fitness for duty and three others saying it is "not minimal" and can be problematic. Congress requested the report after the fatal 2009 crash in Buffalo, New York, which claimed the lives of 50 people.

"That's unacceptable. No wonder we don't have this data. It shows the airlines really don't want to know," she told ABC News.

The study said the "relatively modest" response rate from airlines was due to the "extremely short turnaround" of a few weeks between sending the requests and holding meetings on them, but former Continental Express Jet pilot Josh Verde, said it showed an "unwillingness to help."

"Everyone has something to lose if [pilot commuting] gets regulated and increases costs," Verde told ABC News. "What bothers me about this story is that they're all aware of the safety ramifications but are willing to put it aside because of other motives they have, quality of life and keeping costs down."

An ABC News investigation in February found that large numbers of pilots report to duty every day after getting only a few hours of what fatigue experts call "destructive sleep" in crowded crew lounges and so-called dormitory-style "crash pads."

Over the course of the ABC News investigation, current and former pilots described missing radio calls, entering incorrect readings in instruments and even falling asleep in mid-flight as a result of airline scheduling practices and long-distance commuting. In the past 20 years, more than two dozen accidents and more than 250 fatalities have been linked to pilot fatigue, according to the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB).

Undercover video of crew lounges taken by pilots and provided to ABC News shows pilots sleeping overnight in chairs and on sofas. The practice is contrary to airline rules and also contradicts what the head of the FAA said he was told by industry representatives.

"We're getting a different answer than you're getting, so somewhere there's a gap," FAA administrator Randy Babbitt told ABC News in February. "We asked the carriers themselves -- they're their crew lounges -- is this going on or not? We're not getting the kind of answer you are."

"They're telling us it simply isn't going on," Babbitt said.

Inside Pilot Crash Pads

In so-called "crash pads," stacks of triple-decker bunk beds are crammed into apartments within blocks of

most major airports, part of an underground world that is secret only to the public. Inside one crash pad near LaGuardia airport in New York, there are 28 beds in all in a three-story row home -- "hot bunks" that rent for \$25 a night.

In September 2010, the FAA proposed new rules to help ensure pilots get enough rest before flights, including allowing others to assess whether a pilot is fatigued, but the new study found there was no "valid and reliable" way to do that. Moreover, it said the FAA needs to know more about pilots' commute to effectively combat fatigue.

"Some commutes have the potential to contribute to fatigue in pilots, and fatigue can pose a safety risk, but at this point we simply don't know very much about actual pilots' commuting practices," said NRC committee chair Clint Oster, a professor in the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University, Bloomington. "Airlines and FAA should gather more information on pilots' commutes, and also work with pilots to lower the likelihood that fatigue from commuting will be a safety risk."

Verde said that the suggestion the FAA should gather more information is a "cop out."

"If ABC News can get photos and statements from pilots on what conditions are like, then how is it that this organization doing a scientific study can't get this data?" he said.

"Had we had more information we could have come up with some more helpful insight. We knew going into it was going to be difficult," Oster said.

<http://abcnews.go.com/Blotter/airlines-radio-silent-pilot-fatigue-study/story?id=14009295&page=2>