US group tasked to study pilot fatigue needs more data to draw conclusions

An interim report by the US National Academy of Sciences examining the effects of pilot fatigue acknowledges that travel across multiple time zones could exacerbate commuting-related fatigue, but overall, "there is paucity of information on the nature of commutes or how commuting affects factors that connect sleep and performance".

A US Congressional mandate issued in 2010 required the US FAA to contract with the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to conduct a study of pilot commuting and its effects on fatigue, following highly-publicised reports of one pilot commuting across the country prior to the February 2009 crash of a Colgan Air Bombardier Q400.

The NAS study also is designed to be used by FAA in its final rulemaking revising regulations covering work and duty hours.

Acknowledging little information exists on pilot commuting, the committee assembled by the academy to study the issue requested input from pilot and airline associations and passenger groups to a series of specific questions the committee was asked to review.

"A case could be made that the committee should ideally acquire systematic data to quantify the prevalence and characteristics of pilots and their commutes," the study stated. "However, developing, testing, implementing and analysing a pilot survey to acquire such data would require an extended timeframe that well exceeds the time and resources available to the committee."

Instead going forward the academy's committee said it is relying on data it can obtain from various aviation sources, including the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB).

In the interim phase of the research airlines were asked to supply data on pilot domiciles and home zip codes to allow the committee to obtain estimates of commutes on an individual level. However, "very little information was available at the time of this interim report".

Overall, based on comments and documents collected by the committee to date, "pilots believe that pilot fatigue is a safety concern," said the report. "However, the extent and circumstances under which commuting contributes to fatigue remain unclear."

The final report issued by the committee will include recommended changes to FAA regulations, research priorities and "promising practices".

Source: Air Transport Intelligence news