

Air Safety Board Urges Cockpit Changes

ByANDY PASZTOR

(WSJ) Federal air-safety watchdogs on Friday recommended changes to ensure that emergency cockpit-oxygen systems on thousands of Boeing airliners are properly designed to help pilots fight windshield fires.

The National Transportation Safety Board urged action to lengthen hoses for such oxygen systems, including those installed on certain Boeing 757 and 767 models, so pilots can keep their masks on while retrieving fire-extinguishers stored at the rear of the cockpit.

Concerned about the dangers of inadequately designed hoses forcing pilots to temporarily remove masks in order to reach the portable extinguishers, some pilot union leaders have advocated equipment modifications for four years.

Windshields are among the most common locations for cockpit fires on Boeing jets.

The issue received heightened attention last year, after a United Airlines Boeing 757 experienced a windshield fire en route from New York to Los Angeles, and ended up making an emergency landing at Dulles international Airport outside Washington. While the plane was cruising at 36,000 feet, the captain's lower-front windshield began to smoke and "his eyes began to burn before he donned his oxygen mask and smoke goggles," according to the safety board's latest recommendation letter.

But as the captain left his seat and moved to retrieve the extinguisher, the mask and goggles were "torn off" his face. After putting the protective devices back on, he discharged the fire-retardant chemical and retrieved a second extinguisher at the cockpit door, which was handed over by cabin crew. But according to the safety board, his "mask and goggles came off again" because the oxygen hose was too short.

The recommendation, as well as two related changes to safety procedures, aren't binding on the Federal Aviation Administration. In the past, the agency said it was looking into the hose-length issue, but officials also expressed concerns about pilots possibly getting distracted or even tangled up in longer hoses.

A spokeswoman for the FAA couldn't immediately be reached. A spokeswoman for manufacturer Boeing Co. said company safety experts "are aware of the recommendations" and intend to "work with NTSB, FAA and operators, as needed, to ensure safety continues at the highest levels."

In its recommendation, the safety board stressed that quickly donning cockpit oxygen masks may be the easiest and most effective way to protect pilots during cockpit fires, versus using other onboard systems such as portable smoke hoods or oxygen bottles.

Focusing on the underlying causes for a spate of cockpit windshield fires over the years, the safety board on Friday said it was satisfied with the FAA's progress so far in ordering stepped-up inspections, or replacement, of suspect windshield parts on various Boeing models.

On Friday, Boeing said that since 2001 it has received 38 separate reports of electrical arcing of windshield heaters on its 747, 757, 767 and 777 jetliners, incidents that typically resulted in smoke or flames. A new windshield design appears to have resolved the problems.