

Government study determines FAA should place higher focus on pilot commuting

A new study released by the Department of Transportation's Inspector General (IG) concludes that the US Federal Aviation Administration needs to directly address potential adverse effects of pilot commuting.

The IG conducted its audit of FAA's efforts to combat pilot fatigue and oversight of duty time regulations from August 2009 through July 2011.

In its analysis the IG stated that the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) cited pilot performance or fatigue as a cause or contributing factor in four of the last six fatal accidents involving regional carriers.

Pilot fatigue drew heightened scrutiny after the February 2009 crash of a Colgan Air Bombardier Q400 after it was discovered both pilots commuted hundreds of miles to the Newark domicile.

FAA issued a notice of proposed rulemaking in September 2010 to significantly alter pilot flight duty and rest regulations, but IG stressed that despite potential effects of commuting on fatigue, FAA opted not to include a commuting mandate in the regulation.

One recommendation from the IG to FAA is to collect and analyse data regarding commuting distances and methods of transportation. But while agreeing in part FAA stressed research conducted by the National Academy of Science showed no correlation between pilot commuting and safety. "Since commuting may be the result of a change to an air carrier's business model, such as closing a domicile or furloughing pilots, or due to a crewmember's personal choice, any data collection represents only a snapshot of the industry," said FAA.

FAA also only partially agreed with an IG recommendation to analyse data domicile and commuting data collected to determine if changes are necessary or if airlines need to alter their fatigue management systems. The agency largely believes that fatigue risk management plans being developed by carriers addresses that recommendation.

"The FRMP provides carriers with the ability to determine whether they need to address the commuting practices of its pilots," FAA told IG. The IG asked FAA to reconsider its position on both commuting recommendations, citing interviews conducted with 33 captains and first officers at five air carriers.

Roughly 26, or 79%, said they had experienced fatigue while on duty. Nearly 73% of those pilots were commuters at some point in their career, said IG.

While FAA has taken "commendable" steps to change outdated duty time regulations, IG stressed the agency "should also collect and analyse additional information on pilot domicile and commuting so it can better target solutions to reduce fatigue within the airline industry".

Source: Air Transport Intelligence news