

FAA may require real-world emergency pilot testing

By Alan Levin

WASHINGTON - Federal aviation regulators would require dramatically expanded simulator training for airline pilots under a proposal released Wednesday that is designed to prevent crashes such as the one that killed 50 people two years ago near Buffalo.

In this Feb. 12, 2009, file photo, the wreckage of Colgan Air Flight 3407 lies amid smoke after crashing into a suburban Buffalo home.

In what officials called the most significant update of training requirements in 20 years, the Federal Aviation Administration would require that pilots be tested on more real-world emergencies that have triggered accidents in the past, which is made possible by increasingly realistic flight simulators.

"This is a major effort to strengthen the performance of pilots, flight attendants and dispatchers all through better and enhanced training," FAA Administrator Randy Babbitt said.

While the FAA had begun attempts to broaden simulator training more than two years ago, the proposal was reworked to include recommended safety enhancements and congressional mandates as a result of the Feb. 12, 2009, crash of Colgan Air Flight 3407.

The captain of the turboprop flying from Newark to Buffalo made a series of mistakes as he neared the airport, culminating in an overreaction to a cockpit warning that slowed the plane so much that it plunged to the ground, the National Transportation Safety Board found.

As a result, pilots would be given more realistic training in how to recover from aerodynamic stalls, caused when a plane gets too slow and the wings can no longer hold a plane aloft. Despite training on stall recovery that begins before a pilot gets a license, airline crews have repeatedly mishandled similar emergencies, NTSB case files show.

One key to preventing such accidents in the future will be more realistic training in simulators, Babbitt said.

Currently, pilots are trained to avoid entering a stall at all costs but are never shown how to recover once they have entered a stall.

When the FAA initially proposed enhanced simulator training in January 2009, it met with stiff resistance from carriers, who said that it was too costly.

The agency said that the economic impact of the new simulator training in the revised proposal would be "minimal." Some large airlines already provide pilots simulator training that is similar to what would be required under the rule.

The proposal also addresses another issue that arose during the Buffalo crash investigation. The captain had failed seven piloting skill tests prior to the accident, which raised concerns about his abilities during the NTSB's investigation.

The proposal does not contain any limit on the number of failed tests that a pilot may have, but it would require airlines to better monitor training failures and to provide struggling pilots with remedial training.

The FAA will give airlines and others until July 19 to offer comments on the proposal. Because it could be amended, there is no date for when it will take effect.

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