

DoD Seeks To Ward Off FAA Crew-Rest Rule

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BODY:

The U.S. Defense Department says a proposed Federal Aviation Administration rule meant to ensure that commercial pilots get enough rest could delay the delivery of military equipment and supplies to troops on the battlefield, according to DoD officials and documents.

Air Force Gen. Duncan McNabb, the head of U.S. Transportation Command (TRANSCOM), said last week that the proposed policy could also deter commercial cargo carriers that transport military goods from buying more efficient aircraft that can fly longer distances and more direct routes.

The proposed rule changes would reduce the amount of time a crew can fly, even with a backup crew onboard, from 20 hours to 16 hours. It also would limit the number of hours an individual pilot can fly, depending on his or her commuting time to the airport.

The proposed changes have "raised significant concerns with our industry partners" that make up the Civil Reserve Air Fleet (CRAF), McNabb wrote in a February letter to FAA Administrator Randy Babbitt.

The FAA published a draft of the new rule changes in September and went through a comment phase. The agency plans to publish the finalized rules by August.

CRAF members sign contracts with the Pentagon to transport military supplies to installations around the world. This includes nonstop flights from the U.S. to places as far away as Afghanistan.

TRANSCOM officials believe the proposed FAA rules changes "would have an impact on DoD missions," McNabb wrote. The command, at Scott Air Force Base, Ill., oversees military cargo and passenger movement to locations around the world.

The FAA - which tried to modify its pilot rest rules in the mid-1990s - began working on the new rules after Colgan Air Flight 3407, a commuter plane, crashed shortly before it was due to land in Buffalo, N.Y., in 2009.

A variety of **factors** can affect **pilot** alertness, judgment and performance, according to an FAA fact sheet on pilot fatigue. This includes the "time of day of a flight; day-night or night-day transitions; daytime sleep periods; time off between consecutive work periods; the number of takeoffs and landings in a given time period; the impact of time zone changes on circadian rhythms; early start times; and commuting."

Aviation experts said the rule would improve **safety** standards, particularly with small commuter airlines, where pilots can fly numerous flights each day. These pilots experience a great deal of fatigue due to the high number of takeoffs and landings, the experts said.

But some long-haul cargo carriers oppose the rule changes because they would force them to make additional stops on long flights, or to hire additional pilots to augment crews in flight.

"When you talk about regional carriers that are doing a number of landings versus long international legs, they have different levels of fatigue and they require different approaches," McNabb told the House Armed Services Committee last week.

The type of pilot rest cabins on the aircraft also would affect the amount of time a crew

could fly consecutively. Pentagon officials said they believe the rule could affect some commercial cargo flights from the United States directly to Afghanistan, potentially forcing planes to stop midroute to switch crews because some aircraft do not have rest quarters that meet requirements.

"Certainly it's time and certainly it's dollars," McNabb said April 5.

Modern commercial cargo haulers, such as the Boeing 777 and 747, can fly unrefueled for thousands of miles. Making more stops would burn more fuel.

"What I want to make sure is our U.S. flag fleet stays competitive," the general said. "If we don't take full advantage of modern airplanes, especially on the international market, we will find ourselves not in it. I'm very worried about that because I depend on this."

TRANSCOM relies on CRAF to transport equipment, supplies and passengers around the world. CRAF is used extensively, especially during high-tempo operations, where there is a great demand to move items or people rapidly.

"This proposed rule would take away this flexibility," Rep. John Kline, R-Minn., said during the hearing on Capitol Hill last week. "The impact would be, we would move fewer troops, we would take more time, we could move less equipment."

An Air Force Institute of Technology study found that the proposed rule changes would allow for better "fatigue mitigation" but possibly increase congestion.

"The number of infeasible missions increase under the proposed rules and will need to be addressed by the addition of crew swaps and/or crew rest on the routes as currently configured, or by changing the current route configurations," the study stated.

"These findings suggest that the airlines are currently running optimally," the report stated. "They run as close to the maximum limitations as possible to increase profit. As the limitations change, it would be assumed they would again find the optimum solution to continue the mission."

TRANSCOM uses an operational risk management approach that "allows us to bound our missions for operational hazards and take reasonable measures to reduce risk to personnel, equipment and the mission," according to McNabb's letter. "Thus, we believe there is room for proper exceptions to" the new rules, he wrote. "Through cooperation, we can develop mutually acceptable guidelines that not only mitigate the impact of crew fatigue, but also afford carriers the flexibility to implement safer aircrew processes."