

NEWS from the T&I DEMOCRATS

Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, Democratic Caucus

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GAO: FAA Needs to Fully Implement Inspection System for 99 Non-Legacy Carriers

WASHINGTON—A new study by the Government Accountability Office recommends that the Federal Aviation Administration fully implement its systems-based approach for safety inspections of non-legacy air carriers and address the inspectors' growing workload.

The report (GAO 05-726) was requested by three senior Democratic Members of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure: Reps. James L. Oberstar (Minn.), Peter A. DeFazio (Ore.), and Jerry F. Costello (Ill.).

The report cites the U.S. aviation industry's outstanding safety record—less than one fatal accident per 5 million flights from 2002 to 2004—but calls attention to some needed improvements in the inspection process for non-legacy carriers.

The report categorizes 99 airlines as non-legacy carriers. These carriers represent a fast-growing segment of the commercial aviation passenger industry, carrying about 200 million passengers in 2004. For these carriers FAA has established two processes to oversee these airlines. However, according to GAO, the full potential of FAA's inspection program for these carriers is not being realized due to incomplete implementation of its system safety approach.

"U.S. carriers have a laudable record of safety, thanks in large part to the diligence of the FAA and its inspectors. However, it is important that the agency continue to evolve and improve its inspection program to maintain or even enhance that safety record," said Oberstar, Ranking Democrat on the full T&I Committee. "This report provides the FAA with the opportunity to do just that."

"Airline passengers expect to arrive safely at their destination regardless of the name on the plane," said DeFazio, Ranking Member on the Highways and Transit Subcommittee and a Member of the Aviation Subcommittee.

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“Many passengers don't even realize until they board the flight, that the plane they're flying on is often a regional jet that has been contracted out by the legacy carrier from which they purchased their ticket. It is critical that the FAA maintain the same safety standards for non-legacy carriers,” DeFazio said.

The GAO report further noted that inspector workload also presents a challenge to FAA's oversight, as the number of inspectors available to oversee non-legacy airlines has declined due to attrition and transfers, and most losses were not replaced due to a hiring freeze.

“Safety must always be our first priority and the same care and attention should be provided to all airlines,” said Costello, Ranking Member on the Aviation Subcommittee. “The FAA must ensure that it has the workforce necessary to implement its safety protocols. If not, it needs to provide Congress with a blueprint of how to rectify the situation.”

The report recommends that FAA develop a continuous evaluative process for its inspections of the non-legacy carriers and link the process to performance-related goals and measures developed by the agency. Evaluations should include an analysis of inspection findings to identify risks and trends at the national level. GAO also recommends that FAA improve its communications and training procedures throughout the evaluative process.

GAO Report #05-726 is available online at www.gao.gov

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