



U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Washington, DC 20515

Don Young
Chairman

James L. Oberstar
Ranking Democratic Member

April 30, 2004

Lloyd A. Jones, Chief of Staff
Elizabeth Megginson, Chief Counsel

David Heymsfeld, Democratic Chief of Staff

The Honorable David M. Walker
Comptroller General of the United States
441 G Street, NW, Room 1000
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Walker:

The U.S. aviation industry is undergoing significant changes as airlines continue to restructure their operations to return to profitability. While much of our effort has been focused on security since September 11th, it is incumbent on us to continue to ensure that appropriate attention and resources are being applied to aviation safety. A very important component of the nation's air transportation system is the regional airline industry. A regional airline is one that operates short- and medium-haul airline service connecting smaller communities with larger cities and connecting hubs using 9- to 68-seat turboprops and 30- to 100-seat regional jet aircraft.

Over the last decade, these regional carriers have experienced tremendous growth. The number of passengers enplaned on regional carriers has more than doubled, from about 49 million in 1992 to around 98 million in 2002. Projections indicate that by 2014, these carriers will enplane nearly 174 million passengers annually. According to recent information, the safety record of regional airlines compares favorably with that of the entire air carrier industry. The accident rate is slightly lower for regional airlines than for the air carrier industry as a whole, but the regional airlines have a slightly higher fatality rate. However, the fatal crashes of two turboprop aircraft flown by regional carriers in 2003 have raised some concerns about the quality of regional airline maintenance and Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) oversight of regional airline safety.

Since about 1997, all airlines providing service in aircraft with 10 or more passenger seats have operated under identical regulations established by the FAA. However, FAA uses different inspection programs to monitor the airlines' safety performance. One of these programs, the Air Transportation Oversight System (ATOS), which FAA initiated in October 1998 for the 10 largest carriers, assesses safety by evaluating the effectiveness of the carriers' operations and maintenance systems. Approximately 500 of FAA's 3,400 safety inspectors are implementing this program. The other inspection programs, for the 129 carriers that are not part of ATOS, assess safety largely by determining whether the carriers are complying with FAA's regulations. Among these other inspection programs is the Regional Aviation Inspection Program, which FAA has traditionally

The Honorable David M. Walker
April 30, 2004
Page 2

relied on to oversee regional airlines. However, it is our understanding that this program is no longer operating.

Accordingly, we request that your office undertake a comprehensive assessment of FAA's safety oversight of regional airlines. Specifically, we would like GAO to address the following questions:

1. What are the nature and scope of FAA's current safety oversight programs and policies for regional airlines?
2. How adequate is FAA's oversight of regional airlines to ensure their compliance with safety regulations?
3. In what ways can FAA's oversight of regional airlines be improved?

For all of these questions, we are interested in GAO's analysis of the issues as well as the views of key industry stakeholders and other knowledgeable parties.

If, in the course of your work you identify other relevant issues that you believe the Congress should be aware of, we would like you to include them in your analysis. Should you have any questions or need additional information, please contact Stacie Soumbeniotis at (202) 225-9161.

Sincerely,



James Oberstar
Ranking Democratic Member
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure



Peter A. DeFazio
Ranking Democratic Member
Subcommittee on Aviation