

Slaughter joins bipartisan group of lawmakers to urge Administration officials to disregard "misguided" recommendations from industry insiders

WASHINGTON – Today Rep. Louise Slaughter joined Reps. Chris Lee (NY-26), Brian Higgins (NY-27), Rush Holt (NJ-12), Tim Holden (PA-17), Bob Inglis (SC-04), and Russ Carnahan (MO-03) and sent a letter to Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood and Randy Babbitt, Administrator of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), urging them to adhere to the pilot training guidelines set forth in the long-overdue aviation safety reforms signed into law this past July (full text of the letter below). The bipartisan group of lawmakers sent the letter to the two leading transportation officials in response to a recent proposal put forward by the FAA's Aviation Rulemaking Committee which would drastically cut the 1,500-hour minimum flight time requirement included in the law, allowing inadequately trained pilots in the cockpits of America's commercial airplanes.

In their letter to Secretary LaHood and Administrator Babbitt, the lawmakers said it would be "misguided" to decrease the 1,500-hour minimum flight time requirement to 500 hours, as the FAA's Aviation Rulemaking Committee suggested. According to the lawmakers, "The cornerstone of this legislation is a requirement that both captains and first officers on part 121 carriers possess an Airline Transport Pilot (ATP) license prior to stepping into a cockpit. This would require pilots to obtain 1,500 hours of hands-on flight experience – experience that would significantly close the gap between regional airlines and major carriers."

The minimum flight time requirement was included among a list of several other much-needed aviation safety reforms that were passed with the FAA reauthorization bill in late July. These reforms were passed in the wake of the Colgan Air Flight 3407 tragedy that claimed the lives of 50 people on February 12, 2009 outside of Buffalo, NY.

Full text of the letter:

Dear Secretary LaHood and Administrator Babbitt:

We write to you today to express our disappointment in the proposal by the Federal Aviation Administration's Aviation Rulemaking Committee that would undercut the 1,500-hour minimum flight time requirement recently endorsed by both Congress and the President.

Less than three months ago, Congress passed and the President signed the Airline Safety and Federal Aviation Extension Act of 2010. This comprehensive aviation safety package addresses the serious deficiencies in our pilot training requirements that have led to the unnecessary loss of many lives. These shortcomings were recently witnessed in the tragic crash of Continental Connection Flight 3407, operated by regional carrier Colgan Air, on February 12, 2009 outside of Buffalo, New York. This crash took the lives of all 49 passengers onboard as well as one man on the ground, and it shined a spotlight on the need to reform the way regional air carriers operated to ensure "one level of safety" across all airliners. Many of these shortcomings have been identified by government regulators for 40 years but still not addressed.

Regional air carriers like Colgan Air now make up almost half of all commercial flights in the United States, an increase of 40 percent since 2003. Meanwhile, regional carriers have been the source of the last six major U.S. air disasters.

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Recently we have learned the air-safety advisory group has concluded that 500 hours of actual flight time, rather than the 1,500-hour minimum endorsed by Congress, should be considered adequate for newly-hired first officers. There is simply no practical comparison between classroom hours and flight hours. It is misguided to count 1,000 classroom hours toward the law's 1,500-hour requirement and a clear attempt to circumvent the intent of Congress.

Please remember the spirit of this legislation: to ensure each and every person who boards a plane in America will know that there is an experienced, well-trained and prepared pilot in each and every cockpit. This should have never been otherwise.

We appreciate your efforts and look forward to your response on this matter.