

**Congresswoman Louise Slaughter's Hearing Statement
Regional Air Carriers & Pilot Workforce Issues
Subcommittee on Aviation
Thursday, June 11, 2009**

Chairman Costello, Ranking Member Petri and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for holding this important hearing on regional air carriers as well as for the opportunity to testify on this critical issue.

As we are all acutely aware, one of the worst plane accidents in recent U.S. history occurred earlier this year on the night of February 12, just outside of Buffalo, New York. We lost many lives that night and my thoughts and prayers continue to be with the families of the victims whose grief and loss are immeasurable.

We must learn from this tragedy in order to prevent any future loss of life. Beginning on May 12, the National Transportation Safety Board conducted 3-days of hearings on Colgan Air, Flight 3407. We were all shocked and saddened by what we learned about regional carriers.

There are still many unanswered questions and a lot of work to be done to ensure the safety of passengers and crew when travelling on regional airlines. As members of Congress, this is our responsibility and our mission.

Much of what we have learned about regional airline industry training and standards is shocking and must be addressed immediately with strong, meaningful and timely legislation.

Regional airlines' training programs are clearly inadequate. It's unacceptable for flight academies, such as Florida-based Gulfstream academy, to advertise they can train amateur pilots who have aspirations to fly for a major carrier in only three months and for as much as \$30,000 in tuition. Passengers deserve only the very best trained pilots and I commend Secretary LaHood and Administrator Babbitt for recently ordering FAA inspectors to ensure regional carrier training programs are complying with federal regulations. We must demand that all pilots receive extensive and thorough training as well as enforce the highest standards for the regional carrier industry.

I was amazed to learn how little pilots are paid upon graduating from flight academies. The first officer of Flight 3407 was paid \$16,000 a year. How are pilots expected to live on that sum of money? Apparently there is a joke among pilots: “What do you call a regional first officer without a girlfriend? You call him homeless.” This is not funny, especially when regional carriers account for half the country’s scheduled airline trips. Thousands of lives are at stake daily and these pilots must be compensated properly to ensure we attract the best possible people to fly these planes.

This leads me to the issue of fatigue, a major a factor in Buffalo’s tragedy. In order to make ends meet, regional pilots may have work four or five days a week and as much as 14-to 16-hour days, coupled by having to fly back and forth across the country. It is no wonder that pilots and crew are found sleeping in airport crew lounges or even worse, in their cars. We must demand compliance with the mandate that they are allowed a sufficient amount of rest in order to remain alert and react properly to critical situations, such as a stall warning.

I was also stunned to learn that the pilot of Flight 3407 had failed five tests, including two with Colgan Air. Even more disturbing is the fact that the airline was not aware of two of the three other failures. This is absolutely unacceptable. We must provide airlines access to a pilot’s entire flying history and it should be made readily available on the internet. Passengers should not have to guess whether their pilots are competent prior to boarding a plane.

Like many of my colleagues, I fly weekly on regional airlines. While I purchase my ticket from U.S. Air, the plane is in fact operated and maintained by Wisconsin Air. This information is not provided at the point of purchase, let alone prior to boarding the plane. We must require airlines to disclose to consumers the operator of their flight prior to purchasing their ticket so that they have the opportunity to make well-informed choices.

Most recently, a FAA investigation accused Florida-based Gulf Stream Airlines of overworking their pilots and breaking aircraft maintenance rules. Former pilots reported seeing parts fall off of the planes and that records were changed or erased. I was appalled to learn further that the airline installed unapproved air-conditioner compressors. These types of practices must come to an end and regional airlines must be held accountable for their negligence. I think we’ve only scratched the surface of anything goes and safety is second to profit.

We must address all these critical issues to ensure our safety when boarding a regional airplane. It is our responsibility and duty to help restore the public's faith in these airlines through introducing strong legislation that requires compliance with all standards and a FAA that can assure us that they are able to certify it.

There are many charges of a too cozy relationship between airline owners and the FAA. Some teeth in "suggestions" from NTSB are also necessary. Why shouldn't all the painstaking work of that agency be given the power to force compliance? Lives depend on it.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your diligence and the experience you bring to this issue. I look forward to working with you.