

Written Testimony
House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Member Day Hearing 4/18/2023
The Honorable Jack Bergman

Thank you to the Chairman and Ranking Member for giving me the opportunity to testify this morning. As a lifelong aviator, I have seen firsthand the evolution of air travel in the United States. From the first commercial flight in 1914, to the dawn of the jet age, to today – one constant has remained – we have strived and succeeded in making air travel as safe as possible.

Since our last major aviation accident, Colgan Air flight 3407 which killed 49 passengers and crew and one person on the ground, there have been two fatalities in domestic commercial air travel over 13 years. This incredibly impressive safety record is not an aberration, it's due to an unrelenting focus by Congress, the FAA, our pilots, and the airlines to ensure the safety of the flying public. Each incident over the last 100 plus years of commercial flight has taught us lessons that we have incorporated into policy changes, aircraft construction innovations, and new training methods.

As this Committee begins work on the FAA Reauthorization bill, I'd like to ask that committee members keep safety top of mind. After the Colgan Air crash, Congress made significant changes, including requiring 1,500 hours of flight time before a first officer can fly for a commercial US carrier, increased rest periods for pilots, and enhanced pilot training. It is clear these changes have and will continue to make air travel safer.

I would argue the most important provision in the 2010 FAA reauthorization bill was increasing the number of hours pilots have to spend flying prior to entering commercial aviation. There is no simulator or classroom that can replace being in the cockpit of an airplane above the clouds. While classroom learning and simulators are an incredible tool for pilots to learn and train for scenarios that would be unsafe or not feasible, they cannot replicate the real thing.

Many members have expressed concerns about a “pilot shortage” and used this as the basis to look at ways to increase the number of new pilots. It’s no secret that nearly every industry has struggled to meet their labor needs post-pandemic. In fact, from 2019-2021 domestic carriers saw 9,671 pilots retire. During the same time period however, the FAA’s Civil Airmen Chart shows 15,591 new air transport pilot licenses were issued. That’s 6,000 pilots more than the number that retired. While there may be a labor shortage impacting the number of flights that US carriers can schedule, it’s not due to a lack of qualified pilots. It’s imperative that we do not sacrifice flight hour requirements and passenger safety to fix a problem that doesn’t exist.

While I loved my decades flying commercial aircraft, I knew I couldn’t do it forever. In 2007 at age 60 – the mandatory retirement age at the time – I retired from Northwest Airlines. Later that year, Congress passed a bill to align with ICAO standards and increased the retirement age to 65, where it stands today. You cannot replace the experience of an older pilot, but as we age our health risks increase, and at a certain point those risks outweigh the wealth of knowledge and experience older pilots have. If the retirement age were raised, senior commercial aviators, who tend to fly larger aircraft on international routes, would only be able to serve domestic destinations and a couple of countries with a retirement age over 65. This would force seasoned pilots into new, potentially unfamiliar aircraft, with an elevated risk of a health emergency while also delaying the progression of a more junior pilot.

There have been around 8 billion domestic enplanements since our last multiple fatality aviation accident in the United States, but that doesn't mean we should rest on our laurels and relax commonsense requirements. We set the gold standard for global aviation safety and produce the best pilots in the world. As you craft the FAA Reauthorization bill, I hope you build on the success these carefully crafted laws have brought to the entire aviation industry and not jeopardize the safety of our pilots, crews, and passengers.

Thank you.