

HEARING THE CALL

U.S. air carriers are handing the FAA written promises to institute recommended safety programs.

BY LINDA WERFELMAN

Ninety-three percent of U.S. air carriers have responded to the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) “Call to Action on Airline Safety and Pilot Training” by submitting written promises to implement specific safety practices, including the establishment of two safety-information-gathering programs, the FAA says.

The information-gathering programs are flight operational quality assurance (FOQA) — sometimes known as flight data monitoring — and the

aviation safety action program (ASAP) — a voluntary, self-disclosure reporting program. The airlines also agreed to develop data analysis “to ensure effective use of this information.” In addition, the FAA called on air carriers to ask pilot job applicants to voluntarily disclose certain FAA records, including “notices of disapproval for evaluation events,” and to “adhere to the highest professional standards.”

“We take these commitments very seriously and believe they are a big step toward making future commercial air

travel even safer than it is today,” said FAA Administrator Randy Babbitt.

In early October, the FAA singled out the 30 airlines¹ that had not complied with the agency’s request for a written commitment, making public a list of their names.

“The operators ... who have not responded need to understand the American public will ultimately judge their reluctance to adopt proven safety practices,” Babbitt said. “The fact that carriers haven’t responded or are too small to have certain programs in place

will be taken into consideration when performing FAA surveillance activities. Our goal is to ensure that all carriers are operating at the highest levels of safety.”

He noted, however, that several of the named carriers already were using FOQA and ASAP and that some “may simply be too small or have too limited operations for FOQA programs to be practical.”

Around the same time, Babbitt told a congressional subcommittee that the call to action in June was followed by a letter to all air carrier operators and their unions, seeking to “solidify oral commitments” to honor the call to action — in particular, commitments in several key areas, including FOQA, ASAP and voluntary pilot disclosure of FAA records.

In addition, Babbitt asked labor organizations for their commitment in the following areas:

- To “establish and support professional standards and ethics committees to develop peer audit and review procedures, and to elevate ethics and professional standards”;
- To “establish and publish a code of ethics that includes expectations for professional behavior, standards of conduct for professional appearance and overall fitness to fly”; and,
- To “support periodic safety risk management meetings between FAA and mainline and regional carriers to promote the most effective practices, including periodic analysis of FOQA and ASAP data with an emphasis on identifying enhancements to the training program.”

Babbitt said that the FAA’s June call to action had yielded information that the agency already has begun to use in industrywide safety improvement efforts.

Among the first actions taken by the FAA as a result of the call to action was the establishment of an aviation rulemaking committee to develop recommendations for new rules on flight time limitations, duty period limits and

rest requirements for pilots in operations covered by U.S. Federal Aviation Regulations Part 121, “air carriers and commercial operators,” and Part 135, “commuter and on-demand operations.” The rulemaking process, which is aimed at developing a “science-based approach to fatigue management,” is continuing.

In addition to the call to action, another ongoing process, dealing with all aspects of FAA regulations, is the agency’s effort to revise procedures used to ensure air carrier compliance with airworthiness directives (see “Procedural Overhaul”).

Another element of the call to action involved what the FAA calls a focused inspection initiative, which requires principal operations inspectors for Part 121 operators to “conduct a focused program review of air carrier flight crewmember training, qualification and management practices.”

These reviews, which have been completed, called for FAA inspectors to meet



Procedural Overhaul



The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), in response to recommendations from an FAA-industry review team, is modifying the procedures used in ensuring that air carriers comply with airworthiness directives (ADs).

The FAA said that the changes are intended to improve “service information and instructions from aerospace manufacturers, air carrier management of planning and prototyping how ADs are implemented, [and] FAA coordination with the air carriers through the planning and prototyping process.”

The review team was appointed by then-Acting Administrator Robert A. Sturgell in mid-2008, in the aftermath of two events involving airline compliance with ADs issued by the FAA. The team was asked to review compliance issues related to one of those events, as well as the general process for developing ADs.

The specific event singled out for review involved the cancellation, over a four-day period in April 2008, of about 3,000 flights by American Airlines while the airline conducted aircraft wiring inspections on McDonnell Douglas MD-80s in accordance with AD 2006-15-15.¹

“From this review, it became clear that while the events that created such massive disruptions were an anomaly, there were areas where system improvements could be made to mitigate such major disruptions in the future,” said the final report by the AD Compliance Review Team.²

The team’s general review concluded, “The AD processes within the FAA and within the manufacturing and air carrier

industry have worked well over the years. However, during this review, the team uncovered areas where improvements can be made.”

The FAA received related recommendations in September 2008 from an Independent Review Team that reviewed the FAA’s safety culture and safety management (ASW, 11/08, p. 10).

The FAA has established an aviation rulemaking committee (ARC) to review AD-related recommendations from both panels. The FAA said that the agency is drafting proposals to be considered by the ARC, which is expected to develop an implementation plan; all actions in the plan are expected to be completed by 2011.

—LW

Notes

1. The other event involved the operation by Southwest Airlines of 46 airplanes that had not been inspected for fuselage fatigue cracks in accordance with an AD issued in 2004; the event resulted in a \$7.5 million civil penalty against the airline in March 2008. At the time, the FAA said that the 46 airplanes had been operated on 59,791 flights during parts of 2006 and 2007 without having had the required inspections. Southwest said that the missed inspections were “one of many routine and redundant inspections” that involved “an extremely small area in one of the many overlapping inspections” that were conducted to detect early indications of fatigue cracking.
2. AD Compliance Review Team. *Airworthiness Directives: Process Review Technical Report*. July 8, 2009.

with officials of each air carrier to evaluate the carrier’s ability to “identify, track and manage low-time flight crewmembers and those who have failed evaluation events or demonstrated a repetitive need for additional training,” and to determine whether carriers have adopted FAA recommendations for remedial training for pilots with “persistent performance deficiencies.”

About two-thirds of the carriers with traditional systems of pilot training and checking used systems that enabled them to identify low-time crewmembers and those with persistent performance problems, Babbitt said. Carriers without such systems will be subject to intensified oversight to ensure that their training and qualification programs comply with regulatory requirements, he said.

Babbitt said the FAA would provide carriers with guidance material on how to conduct a comprehensive training program review, including information on the role of a review within an operator’s corporate safety structure and safety management system. The current goal is to complete the guidance material by the end of the year.

Also by the end of the year, the FAA expects to issue a final report summarizing its findings and recommending additional action items, Babbitt said, adding that the report will include measures to assess progress. ➤

Note

1. In late October, a revised list named 22 operators that had not complied with the FAA request.