



OVERSIGHT Threatened

A somewhat unexpected benefit from airlines forming globe-circling business alliances has been the creation of a new layer of safety oversight as alliance partners check on each other and provide assistance.

Strangely enough, the competition-driven quasi-consolidation of the alliance movement provides a more profound safety improvement through cooperation than airlines achieved back in the pre-deregulation era, when they were encouraged not only to cooperate on economic matters but also were required to maintain a high degree of commercial coordination in international operations. Sure, there was mutual back-scratching on maintenance issues, and even the formation of maintenance consortia in which medium-sized carriers pooled resources to approach large airline economies of scale in overhaul facility operations, but airlines were not much attuned to checking up on each other's operations. I suspect that, given the pride most airlines had in their unique operating protocols, such checking would not have been tolerated.

Now, however, as Croatian Airlines' Tomislav Gradisar pointed out at the Foundation's recent European Aviation Safety Seminar in Nicosia, Cyprus, the evolved inter-airline safety system has

"adequate finances, adequate human resources and unlimited scope," not constrained to the limits of regulation, able to reach beyond those limits when more should or could be achieved. But there is a weakness in this system: "They want to make it work."

I take his intended point, that an intra-alliance oversight might be tainted by a need to make the audits show good results. However, his words also can be taken in another way: Oversight conducted on the straight and narrow has the power to achieve the end goal, as well.

Thus it has been that collaborations crafted largely for commercial motives have had a safety payoff, not only because of the requirements put on these alliances by governments as part of the price for approval but also from pilot groups from diverse alliance carriers coming together to share their information in a new kind of organization that crosses borders and hemispheres.

Now, however, there is a regressive tide of thought sweeping through the U. S. House of Representatives that runs counter to the past three decades-plus of convincing governments to treat airlines as they treat nearly every other form of business enterprise. The proposed legislation would increase the burden on

airlines trying to maintain an alliance. Not all alliances are wildly successful, and should U.S.-imposed rules prove to be the stick that breaks the camel's back, that extra layer of oversight would be lost.

In addition, the House's wrong-headed attack on airlines also would require the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to inspect non-U.S. maintenance facilities used by U.S. carriers twice a year, a move that would be a direct violation of last year's U.S.-European Union (EU) agreement to allow reciprocal treatment of maintenance and repair facilities. Ultimately, the proposed requirement also would mean that the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) would have to inspect U.S. shops used by EU airlines, as well. It is doubtful that either the FAA or the EASA has the resources to conduct such inspections, and this would create severe service disruptions.

There are no safety benefits to be derived from either proposal. In fact, the opposite would be the result.

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J.A. Donoghue".

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