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Congress Nears Passage of Slimmed-Down Air-Safety Bill

By ANDY PASZTOR And JOSH MITCHELL

House and Senate leaders, deadlocked over a comprehensive FAA bill including plans for air-traffic control improvements, have compromised on a slimmed-down measure to enhance airliner safety.

Expected to get final congressional approval in the next few days, the legislation raises minimum experience and training requirements for new airline pilots. It also requires that before purchasing tickets on the Internet, passengers must be specifically informed when a flight will be operated by a commuter carrier operating on behalf of a larger airline.

But some of the pilot-training and other oversight provisions have prompted objections from both industry representatives and Federal Aviation Administration officials, who argue lawmakers are attempting to micromanage safety rules. And the bill doesn't address longer-term issues related to scheduling and funding of the FAA's proposed shift to a satellite-based traffic-control system.

In abandoning the original legislation, at least for now, lawmakers also left unresolved controversial provisions over union organizing at FedEx Corp. and approval of long-distance flights from Washington's Reagan National Airport. Those issues have blocked agreement on a broader bill for many months, prompting lawmakers to approve a series of stopgap extensions to the FAA's spending and taxing authority.

Still, the bill seeks to substantially raise training standards, by mandating that all airline pilots must have at least 1,500 hours of flight time in their log books before flying passengers—up from 250 hours currently for some newly hired co-pilots. The FAA and industry groups, on the other hand, contend the most important factor is the type of training that is provided rather than the total number of hours behind the controls.

The legislation also envisions closer scrutiny of commuter carriers by their larger airline partners. It directs the FAA to update rules on pilot duty hours and rest time to alleviate cockpit fatigue, an effort the agency already has underway. And it mandates creation of a national database of pilot records, making it easier for airlines to conduct background checks when hiring.

Those measures are designed to address safety gaps exposed by the February 2009 crash of Colgan Air Inc. flight 3407, operating for Continental Airlines Inc., that killed all 49 people on board and one person on the ground in a suburb outside Buffalo, N.Y.

Senate Commerce Committee Chairman Jay Rockefeller (D., W.Va.), who led negotiations on the bill, said in a statement that the legislation "will boost pilot training programs, combat pilot fatigue, and dramatically increase requirements for pilots of passenger airlines to have more flying experience."

But like other senators, the chairman expressed disappointment that the broader bill was sidelined. The Senate measure, for example, included timetables for phasing in satellite-based navigation and opened the door for federal and state-backed financial support for installation of such new equipment by airlines. In addition, it called for studies of hazards posed by distracted pilots and the impact of higher oil prices on the long-term viability of the industry.

A spokesman for House Transportation Committee Chairman James Oberstar (D., Minn.), a main proponent of the FedEx provision, said the chairman would continue to press for the unionization legislation and other provisions of the broader bill when Congress returns after the August recess.

"Airlines remain fully committed to improving the safest air transportation system in the world," according to James C. May, president and chief executive of the Air Transport Association, which represents large U.S. carriers. "We look forward to working with Congress to finish the work already started."

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