Office of the Inspector General
Audit Report

Management Advisory Memorandum on Airline Safety Data for Consumers

Federal Aviation Administration

Report Number: AS-FA-7-002
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DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

ACTION: Management Advisory Memorandum
on Airline Safety Data for Consumers   October 28, 1996
Report No. AS-FA-7-002

Joyce N. Fleischman   J-3:x61964
Acting Inspector General

Federal Aviation Administrator

This memorandum addresses our review of whether the Department of Transportation (DOT) provides adequate comparative information to consumers on the safety record of airlines. This review was undertaken in light of recent concerns over airline safety and DOT's efforts to ensure aviation safety. While DOT issues a wide variety of data on aviation statistics, no reports are issued that give comparative information on individual airline safety.

To determine the availability of airline safety data, we held discussions with officials from the Office of the Secretary of Transportation (OST) Assistant General Counsel for Aviation Enforcement and Proceedings; Bureau of Transportation Statistics' (BTS) Office of Airline Information; Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) Office of System Safety; and the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). We also reviewed reports and other aviation data compiled and disseminated by these organizations. The following summarizes the results of our review on airline information available within DOT.

OST publishes airline service quality data on flight delays, mishandled baggage, and oversales. The rules to collect this data are contained in Title 14, Code of Federal Regulations, Parts 234 and 250, and were issued to produce highly visible consumer information on airline performance and to provide a strong market-based incentive for airlines to improve the quality of their service. Each month, the Office of Aviation Enforcement and Proceedings publishes the Air Travel Consumer Report to assist consumers with information on the quality of services provided by the largest U.S. airlines, i.e., those with at least 1 percent of total domestic scheduled-service passenger revenues. The report shows the percentage of times each flight departed and arrived on time during the month. The report also rates the 10 largest airlines based on the total number of reports each airline received from passengers concerning lost, damaged, delayed, or pilfered baggage. In addition, the Air Travel Consumer Report summarizes consumer complaints received by OST. However, the report does not include safety complaints.

To advise consumers of their rights and responsibilities in an unregulated commercial airline environment, OST publishes the "Consumer Guide to Air Travel," "A Consumer's Guide to Small Claims Court," and a fact sheet entitled "Plane Talk." Again, none of these publications assist the consumer in selecting an airline based on its safety record.

The Office of Airline Information within BTS collects airline traffic and capacity data by operating entity, service category, and aircraft type on a recurrent basis from both large and small certificated air carriers for use by the Department, other Government agencies, and other users. The information collected includes data on transported passengers, available seats, aircraft departures, and segment distances. These elements are used to generate "Airport Activity Statistics" for use in FAA's Airport Improvement Program. The financial database, which includes balance sheet and income statement

data, and the Origin-Destination Survey database, which shows city-pair routings, passenger totals, and pricing data, are used by FAA safety programs, airport development programs, and forecast programs. Major FAA offices that use BTS data collected from the airlines include Flight Standards Service and the Office of Integrated Safety Analysis. Although the reports from BTS provide users with data to aid in economic, financial, and safety policy decisions, the reports do not provide comparative information on the safety of airlines for consumers.

As part of FAA's responsibility for aviation safety, it administers a wide range of databases including the Enforcement Information System (EIS) and the Safety Performance Analysis System (SPAS). The EIS, administered by the Aviation Standards National Field Office in Oklahoma City, supports FAA's compliance and enforcement programs. It includes enforcement information from the Offices of Flight Standards, Aircraft Certification, Civil Aviation Security, and Airports. SPAS, when fully deployed, is expected to produce indicators of an airline's safety performance. The primary purpose of SPAS is to enable FAA to identify safety-related risks and to establish priorities for FAA inspectors. These databases, while containing safety indicators, are not made available to the public.

As part of FAA's efforts to improve and enhance aviation safety by sharing data, the Office of System Safety recently established the National Aviation Safety Data Analysis Center (NASDAC). NASDAC is an extensive data warehouse containing aviation safety information. Information in NASDAC includes accident and incident data, aircraft-specific information, safety recommendations, and safety-trend analysis. Specifically, NASDAC contains NTSB aviation accident and incident data, NTSB recommendations, and FAA's National Airspace Incident Monitoring System (NAIMS). NAIMS includes databases on pilot deviations, operational errors, near-midair collisions, vehicle/pedestrian deviations, and runway incursions. (The exhibit contains a listing of NASDAC databases.)

NASDAC warehouses important and critical data on aviation safety, and its goal is to significantly enhance FAA decision-support capability. Its primary mission is to strengthen decisionmaking ability with state-of-the-art database analysis and provide FAA and the world aviation community with a comprehensive source of aviation safety data. Accordingly, NASDAC is primarily used by FAA managers, other Government agencies, and the aviation industry. NASDAC does have safety information available to the public through the Internet. However, the information available to consumers is very limited. For example, information on system indicators is not airline specific and information on safety products includes tips on what types of clothing to wear when flying.

NASDAC has the capability to prepare comparative data on airline safety. Specifically, in May 1996, NASDAC prepared an internal report entitled "Low-Cost Air Carrier Safety Record." The report addressed the issue of comparative safety by analyzing the safety performance of low-cost new entrant air carriers to established air carriers. The report analyzed overall accident rates, serious accident rates, and runway incursions caused by pilot deviations. Despite its capability, FAA has been reluctant to publish airline safety data for fear of misinterpretation of the statistics by the public.

FAA's argument for not compiling comparative safety data is not convincing because FAA can compile information on airline safety and furnish it to the public in a readily understandable form in order to facilitate comparison among airlines. A similar requirement applies to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) with respect to motor vehicle safety. The Motor Vehicle Information and Cost Savings Act of 1972 directs NHTSA to compile information on motor vehicle safety to facilitate comparison among various makes and models by the public.

In our view, critical safety data on individual airlines should be made available to consumers. Providing this data to consumers would improve overall aviation safety by providing a strong market-based incentive for airlines to maintain the highest level of safety in their operations. Furthermore, it

would assist FAA's Office of System Safety to meet its goal of developing, marketing, and promoting safety information. When developing this data, consideration should be given to including accident and incident statistics, inspection information, and enforcement actions.

Recommendation

We recommend the FAA Administrator compile and furnish to the public on a recurrent basis, information on airline safety in a readily understandable form in order to allow consumers to make comparisons among airlines.

Management Response

FAA officials advised us that a July 10, 1996, request from U.S. Senators Ron Wyden and Wendell H. Ford covered issues similar to those raised in our advisory memorandum. The Senators requested that FAA work with the aviation community to recommend the best means to educate the public and to make available to them information about commercial aviation safety. On September 12, 1996, FAA informed Senators Wyden and Ford that the Office of System Safety would assemble a task force to develop recommendations on educating and supplying safety information to consumers. FAA expects to complete its efforts on the Senators' request in November 1996.

In a letter received on October 17, 1996, FAA's Office of System Safety stated it has engaged the services of Gellman Research Associates to develop initial options and recommendations concerning the best means to educate the public and make available to them information about commercial aviation safety. Gellman will be developing a report for aviation community comment. A copy of FAA's letter is included as the appendix to this report.

Audit Comments

The intent of our recommendation was met by FAA's commitment to Senators Wyden and Ford to assemble a task force to work with the aviation community to recommend the best means to educate the public and to make available to them information about commercial aviation safety.

Action Required

Although the recommendation is considered resolved, your progress in implementing the corrective action is subject to the followup provisions of DOT Order 8000.1C. Please provide us a copy of the task force recommendations along with the Gellman report when finalized.

We appreciate the courtesies and cooperation extended by the Office of System Safety. If I can answer any questions or be of any further assistance, please feel free to call me on x61959 or Raymond J. DeCarli on x61964.

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Databases Available in FAA's NASDAC
As of June 1996

Source System	Data Obtained From
NTSB Aviation Accident Database	NTSB
NTSB Recommendations/FAA Responses	FAA
Pilot Deviations	FAA
Operational Errors & Deviations	FAA
Near-Midair Collisions	FAA
Vehicle/Pedestrian Deviations	FAA
Runway Incursions	FAA
FAA Accident/Incident System (AIDS)	FAA
Service Difficulty Reporting System (SDRS)	FAA
Aviation Safety Reports (ASRS)	NASA
Airclaims Database	Air Claims Group, UK
General Aviation Activity Survey	FAA
Landing Facilities/Airports	FAA
Aviation System Indicators	FAA
Aircraft Operations Data - Tower Counts	FAA
Form 41 Activity for Large Carriers	BTS
Form 41 Activity by Carrier/Aircraft Type	BTS
Form 41 Activity by Carrier/Airport	BTS
Form 41 Financial Data	BTS
Form 41, 298-C, etc.	BTS
Official Airline Guide	FAA
Rotocraft Survey	FAA
The Aviation Data CD-ROM	Avantext, Inc.
ATP Navigator	Aviation Technical Publishers

**U.S. Department
of Transportation**

**Federal Aviation
Administration**

800 Independence Ave. SW
Washington, DC 20591

Mr. Raymond J. DeCarli
Assistant Inspector
  General for Auditing
400 7th Street, S.W.
Washington, DC 20591

Dear Mr. DeCarli:

In a letter to Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Administrator David Hinson dated July 10, 1996, Senators Ford and Wyden requested that the FAA work with the aviation community to recommend the best means to educate the public and to make available to them information about commercial aviation safety, while at the same time ensuring that the integrity of the system is maintained. The letter states that, "The availability to the consumer of accurate, consistent and useable information about commercial aviation safety would be extremely helpful in demonstrating the importance the FAA and the industry attach to safety as well as the extent to which safety concerns are integrated into the FAA's and the aviation industry's daily operations." The Administrator assigned this 120-day task to the Office of System Safety.

This is an important issue for the agency, the industry, Congress, and the public. We have engaged the services of Gellman Research Associates to develop initial options and recommendations concerning the best means to educate the public and make available to them information about commercial aviation safety. Gellman will be developing a report for aviation community comment and may contact you directly for your input. You should be receiving their report for your comment by October 23, and because of the short time frames involved, we will be asking your indulgence to provide a response within 10 days

We will be looking at several basic issues for this task, and we hope to help accommodate your short response time by listing some of the major issues here. These issues include:

- What information is now publicly available concerning aviation safety?
- How accessible and timely is the aviation safety information that is currently available?
- What public needs for aviation safety information are not now being met?
- How could the availability and accessibility of safety information to the public be increased?

- To what extent would these increases in the availability and accessibility of safety information satisfy unmet public needs, and what are the other pros and cons of these increases?

We look forward to working with you, and thank you in advance for your time and consideration in relation to this important effort. Meanwhile, if you have any questions, thoughts, or ideas regarding this matter, please feel free to call Dave Balderston (202-267-9179) or me (202-267-3611).

Sincerely,

Christopher Hart, Assistant Administrator
for System Safety, ASY-1