Safety Reports

Aviation Safety Data Accessibility Study Index:
Introduction and Summary

Recently there have been a number of proposals to make aviation safety data more available and accessible to consumers. (Congress. Senate 1996) Some advocate the ranking of carriers based on safety--much as carriers receive rankings for on-time performance, lost baggage and other consumer complaints. (GAO 1996). The FAA, in response to a request from Senators Wyden and Ford, has undertaken an effort to determine the best means of providing safety information to the public while ensuring the integrity of the aviation safety system. This paper reviews aviation safety data and measurement issues relevant for responding to these proposals, including the ranking of airlines by safety performance.

In addition, the paper examines the more general subject of risk communication and how some non-aviation organizations have approached issues related to the release of information. The purpose of the paper is to identify options that may be available to FAA and others regarding the dissemination of aviation safety information. As such, the report makes no recommendations *per se*.

Today, the Federal government makes a variety of aviation safety data available to the public. Many regard the provision of such information about aviation and other industries as a fundamental role of government, especially in an increasingly complex and dynamic economic environment. For example, data on accidents and incidents are made available by both FAA and the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB).

Some data are made available routinely while other data are released upon request. Intermediaries and value-added resellers also obtain some aviation safety data from FAA and sell it along with retrieval software and/or interpretive analysis. The development of the National Aviation Safety Data Analysis Center (NASDAC) and the rapid growth of the internet have created opportunities to make FAA's aviation safety data more directly accessible to the public.

Increased data availability and accessibility also create new opportunities for educating the public on the use and interpretation of aviation safety data, as well as for describing how FAA, the airlines, aircraft manufacturers, airports, flight crews, mechanics, and others work together to promote safety. FAA also should explore the ramifications of making additional forms of data available to the public, such as data emanating from surveillance activities and completed enforcement actions. While these data are made available on a case-by-case basis, routine release of such data raises questions about the effects it could have on FAA's ability to collect safety information and to use the information it collects for its own needs, such as the allocation of inspection resources. In

addition, much of these data contain information on individual air carriers, and it is difficult (for most people) to organize these data in ways which facilitate meaningful comparisons among carriers.

A significant question examined by this paper is what information about aviation safety would be useful for informed consumer choice among airlines. While public concern about the safety of U.S. commercial aviation is most acute immediately following an airline accident, it also seems to reflect the public's view of the aviation industry in general, and its view of FAA's stewardship of aviation safety. Whether or not those inside the industry believe that these concerns are justified given the high absolute levels of aviation safety, the public's concerns are real and are likely to have a large impact on the discourse about air safety.

The paper is organized as a discussion of various topics:

- Safety Data
- Analysis and Interpretation of Safety Data
- Availability and Accessibility of Safety Data
- Experience of Other Federal Agencies
- Public Access to Safety Information

The existing high level of safety in the U.S. air transportation system results from the combined efforts of industry and government including the FAA, airlines, aircraft manufacturers, airports, flight crews, mechanics and others. Indeed, there may be a need to provide additional information as to how these groups work together to promote aviation safety. It may also be useful to make the public more aware of the various mechanisms and incentives these parties have to assure a high degree of aviation safety. These actions could be undertaken as part of any effort to make aviation safety data more available and accessible.