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National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

Safety Recommendation

DLA 89 MA 074

Date: August 3, 1990

In reply refer to: A-90-111

Mr. George L. Peirce
General Manager
The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey
Airport Services Division
LaGuardia Airport
Flushing, New York 11371

On September 20, 1989, USAir, Inc. flight 5050 was an "extra section" passenger flight to replace the regularly scheduled but cancelled flight 1846 from New York City's LaGuardia Airport, Flushing, New York, to Charlotte Douglas International Airport, Charlotte, North Carolina. As the first officer began the takeoff on runway 31, he felt the airplane drift left. The captain noticed the left drift also and used the nosewheel tiller to help steer. As the takeoff run progressed, the aircrew heard a "bang" and a continual rumbling noise. The captain then took over and rejected the takeoff but did not stop the airplane before running off the end of the runway into Bowery Bay. The accident occurred in darkness. Both pilots and the four cabin crewmembers had minor injuries. Two of the 57 passengers were killed and 15 were injured.¹

The Safety Board recognizes that runway 31 at LaGuardia Airport is 7,000 feet long and that USAir flight 5050 could have legally taken off from a runway that was less than 5,000 feet long. However, other airplanes routinely depart LaGuardia under conditions that require the entire 7,000 feet of runway to accelerate or, in the event of a rejected takeoff, to stop. In addition, the Safety Board recognizes that since the last extension of runway 31 more than 20 years ago the FAA has exempted runways at FAA-certificated airports from requirements for overrun safety areas unless plans have been made to extend a runway significantly and the construction of the safety area is economically feasible and practical.

However, since emphasis has recently been placed on improving and de-lethalizing areas beyond runways, including the replacement of rigid supports for approach light systems with frangible supports, the Safety Board is concerned that more attention was not given to LaGuardia's runway 31. USAir flight 5050 dropped about 15 feet into the water of Bowery Bay and collided with massive wood

¹For more detailed information, read Aircraft Accident Report--USAir, Inc. flight 5050, Boeing 737-400, N416US, Flushing, New York, September 20, 1989 (NTSB/AAR-90/03).

and concrete stanchions. Impacting these structures ruptured the fuselage of the airplane, killing the passengers in seats 21A and 21B and trapping two passengers who were nearby. Moreover, if the airplane had carried the maximum number of passengers that it was capable of accommodating, more deaths and serious injuries would most likely have occurred.

The Safety Board believes that some of these hazards could be eliminated. For example, the construction of a sloping ramp from the end of the overrun to the water, as well as the replacement of the approach light stanchions with less massive or frangible stanchions might prove feasible. In addition, the Safety Board believes that improvements should be considered in areas beyond the departure ends of other runways at LaGuardia that contain similar hazards.

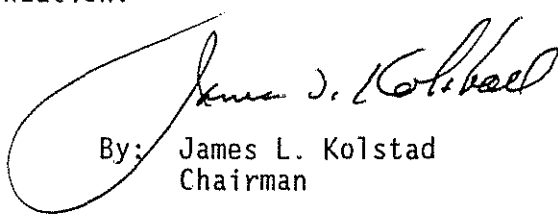
Therefore, as a result of its investigation, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey:

Survey the 1,000 foot by 500 foot surface area contiguous to the departure ends of the runways at the LaGuardia Airport in order to minimize hazards to airplanes that do not stop on the runways.
(Class II, Priority Action) (A-90-111)

Also, as a result of its investigation, the Safety Board issued safety recommendations to the Federal Aviation Administration.

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent federal agency with the statutory responsibility "...to promote transportation safety by conducting independent accident investigations and by formulating safety improvement recommendations" (Public Law 93-633). The Safety Board is vitally interested in any actions taken as a result of its safety recommendations and would appreciate a response from you regarding action taken or contemplated with respect to the recommendation in this letter. Please refer to Safety Recommendation A-90-111 in your reply.

KOLSTAD, Chairman, COUGHLIN, Acting Vice Chairman, LAUBER and BURNETT, Members, concurred in this recommendation.


By: James L. Kolstad
Chairman