FAA promotes 'safety culture' to foster safer skies

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To err is human, but to admit that error can be a powerful tool in the pursuit of air safety.

That's the gist of a recent announcement from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regarding the reporting of errors by its employees. On Wednesday, the agency said it was expanding a non-punitive reporting system so employees throughout the agency could report errors without fear of reprisal or other punishment.

The move, which echoes a similar program put in place for air traffic controllers in 2008, is part of the agency's efforts to create a "safety culture" and to pinpoint areas of concern before they lead to accidents.

"We are moving from an events-based, reactive approach to safety analysis to a risk-based proactive approach," J. David Grizzle, chief operating officer of FAA's Air Traffic Organization, said in a statement. "We presume the good intent of our controllers and are more interested in the free flow of information than we are in punishing for errors."

"Twenty years ago, the only errors that were reported where the ones you couldn't hide," said Bill Voss, president and CEO of the Flight Safety Foundation. "You can't expect people who make honest mistakes to report them unless there's some agreement that they won't automatically be punished."

"It's really the next level of safety," agreed consultant Steve Cowell of SRC Aviation LLC. "If you can report a problem and a hazard can be brought to people's attention, something can be done about it before an accident occurs."

The change, he added, is indicative of a fundamental shift in FAA's approach. "The FAA has always had a reactive system — 'Oh, this happened, let's create a rule' — but you can only regulate safety to a certain point," Cowell told msnbc.com. "This way, it's more open and creates more of a safety culture."

Such reporting is expected to lead to what at first may seem like a significant increase in incidents — similar to the jump noted after a non-punitive reporting system was implemented for air traffic controllers.

In 2009, the agency received 1,234 reports of violations of air-traffic control guidelines; in 2010, that jumped to 1,887, an increase of 53 percent, which FAA attributed to the change in the reporting system. Last year, there were 1,895 reports.

"From a safety-professional standpoint, an increase in the numbers is a positive outcome," said Voss. "It's not that there are more incidents, it's that we know about the ones that are happening."

And Voss expects to see another bump this year as the FAA has implemented a system to collect radar data about planes that come too close together and other potential problems in and around airports. "I'd expect to see some hiccups along the way," he told msnbc.com.

Even so, and despite high-profile incidents involving near-misses, sleeping controllers and other hazards, flying is safer than it's ever been. According to FAA, the 1,895 incidents reported last year occurred during 133 million flight operations, meaning that more than 99.99 percent of flights operated without incident.

"There's no other human endeavor that is inherently so risky but ultimately so safe as aviation," said Voss. "The idea going forward is to gather data that gives us indications in advance of an accident so we don't have to make safety improvements at the crash site."

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Rob Lovitt is a longtime travel writer who still believes the journey is as important as the destination. Follow him at .