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July 10, 2014

The Honorable John Thune
Ranking Member
Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
United States Senate
560 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Ranking Member Thune:

On behalf of the American Association of Airport Executives, I am writing to share with you the deep and growing concern within our membership regarding the current shortage of available qualified pilots and the corresponding reduction or elimination of commercial air service to a number of small communities across the country. Moreover, many of our members believe strongly that absent immediate attention the situation will continue to deteriorate and threaten access to reliable commercial air service for millions of Americans in hundreds of smaller communities across the country.

As you know, a number of small communities have experienced commercial air service reductions, in part, because carriers say that there are not enough qualified pilots to operate their flights. Great Lakes Airlines announced in January that it would end service to six Essential Air Service (EAS) communities in the upper Midwest because of what it called, an “industry-wide pilot shortage.”

Silver Airways announced in February that it would end service between Cleveland and five EAS communities. Two months later the carrier said it would end service between Atlanta and another five communities. Airline officials said that “new federal regulations related to flight and duty limitations, as well as increased requirements related to new hire pilot certifications, have had the unintended effect of creating a nationwide shortage of regional airline pilots.”

Other regional airlines that provide service to small communities are also pulling back – a significant issue in light of the fact that 70 percent of U.S. airports are served exclusively by regional carriers. Earlier this year, Republic Airways announced plans to take 27 regional jets out of service because of “insufficient pilot candidates.” According to airline officials, the move will cost approximately 800 jobs. It will also undoubtedly impact the level of service that the carrier is able to provide to some of the communities it serves.

The problem is also impacting mainline carriers. In February, United Airlines announced its intent to reduce its daily departures out of Cleveland by 60 percent and reduce its regional departures from the same city by over 70 percent. In a letter to employees, United President and CEO Jeff Smisek pointed out that “new regulations have caused mainline carriers to hire regional pilots, while simultaneously significantly reducing the new pilots from which regional carriers themselves can hire.” As you know, regional carriers are critical to mainline operations, providing roughly half of all commercial passenger service departures.

Carriers and other aviation stakeholders suggest that the recently-implemented rule requiring pilots to have at least 1,500 hours of flight time is contributing significantly to the pilot shortage. Some have suggested that there may be better approaches in this area that could enhance aviation safety. We hope you and your colleagues will consider this issue and possible alternatives carefully.

Beyond the 1,500 hour rule, new pilot fatigue rules; high training costs and low wages for pilots and other factors including efforts by the military to retain airmen and perceived instability in the airline industry are seen as contributing factors to the existing pilot shortage. To make matters more complicated, a large number of U.S. pilots are slated to retire in the coming years while pilot demand is expected to increase around the world. According to the RAA, 54,000 pilots in this country will reach the mandatory retirement age and “age out” over the next ten years. Meanwhile, Boeing estimates that the demand for new pilots around the world will reach almost 500,000 over the next two decades or about 25,000 annually.

The impacts of the current pilot shortage on small airports and the communities they serve are significant. Without pilots to fly commercial aircraft, small communities stand to lose substantial tourism and business revenues. Fewer flights and fewer passengers also reduce revenue for airport operations and infrastructure projects. Flight training activity, fuel sales, and corporate jet activity will also be hurt without a pipeline of commercial pilots. Moreover, the effectiveness of the Essential Air Service and Small Community Air Service Development programs could be severely reduced if there are not enough pilots available for carriers that provide service to small communities in the first place.

The current pilot shortage may not be the only factor impacting service to small communities. For instance, carriers are replacing 50-seat regional jets with larger aircraft, which makes operations in small communities more challenging. Moreover, the Governmental Accountability Office suggests that airline industry consolidation, high fuel prices, and other economic factors have contributed to the decline in small community air service in recent years.

To be sure, the causes of the pilot shortage and other factors affecting service to smaller communities are complex and do not lend themselves to easy answers. The situation is likely to get much worse before it gets better unless Congress, the Administration, and aviation stakeholders work together to come up with reasonable solutions. Airport executives around the country are absolutely committed to working with you and your colleagues to come up with those solutions to ensure that people who live in smaller communities continue to have access to our national aviation system and the economic activity that it drives.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Todd Hauptli". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Todd Hauptli
President & CEO
AAAE