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Reworking the Rest Formula for Safer Skies

By Cindy Skrzycki
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One of Charles Lindbergh's challenges in flying the Spirit of St. Louis across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927 was keeping his eyes open for 33.5 hours.

"My mind clicks on and off," Lindbergh wrote in his detailed account of the first solo transatlantic flight. "I try letting one eyelid close at a time when I prop the other open with my will. But the effort's too much. Sleep is winning. My whole body argues dully that nothing, nothing life can attain is quite so desirable as sleep."

Robert Sumwalt, a former US Airways Group pilot who is now vice chairman of the U.S. National Transportation Safety Board, cited this Lindbergh experience at a symposium on aviation fatigue management last month. The Federal Aviation Administration, whose regulations limit a pilot to flying eight hours in any 24-hour period, sponsored the gathering as it considers updating its rules.

The June 17-19 meeting gathered experts to discuss the latest research on recognizing, managing and lessening the risk of fatigue for flight crews, air traffic controllers and maintenance workers. It came at a time when safety experts are calling for improvements and airlines are cutting staff to cope with record fuel prices.

"We want flight and duty time based on scientific evidence," said Sumwalt, noting that over the past 15 years, the NTSB has linked fatigue to more than 250 fatalities in accidents.

In another incident, a Mesa Air Group plane carrying 40 passengers overshot an airport in Hawaii in February because the pilots were asleep. The pilots finally responded to an air traffic controller's urgent call and landed the plane safely.

The FAA last proposed to update its rules on flight and rest time for crew members in 1995. The effort attracted thousands of comments and no consensus between management and labor, and thus, no new rule.

Since the FAA set duty and rest time rules in 1964, the science of sleep has advanced to where mathematical models can indicate when groups of workers are most alert or need sleep, and how that affects performance.

"We realized there has been an awful lot of work done on the science side of fatigue," Peggy Gilligan, FAA deputy associate administrator for aviation safety, said about the symposium. The agency wants labor and management groups to have the best information on biological causes of fatigue and how it can be minimized, she said.

Gilligan said the FAA may look at the flexible scheduling practices working best and propose them in a rulemaking. She couldn't say when that would be.

Pilots agree the government should act.

"We feel it's time for rulemaking," said Don Wykoff, chairman of the Washington-based Air Line Pilots Association's flight- and duty-time committee. "The current federal regulations are inadequate and don't reflect what we do today. The duty day is too long."

Wykoff said flying "the backside of the clock," or at night and across time zones, takes its toll, especially when combined with the short time crews have to eat, sleep, shower and get back to work.

The NTSB also has asked the FAA to address fatigue among air traffic controllers, who often work overtime, don't have regular work schedules, or have six-day work weeks with long periods of intense concentration.

"The U.S. is behind the power curve on this stuff," said Patrick Forrey, president of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association in Washington, referring to implementing the research cited at the meeting.

Hank Krakowski, chief operating officer of the FAA Air Traffic Organization, said controllers' schedules depend on air traffic at each facility. He said talks are underway with their union to address fatigue issues.

The use of mathematical models to adjust schedules for changes in performance was on display at the symposium.

"It leads to concrete actions to improve quality of life for employees and safety for the general public," said Steven Hursh, president of the Institutes for Behavior Resources, a nonprofit group in Baltimore. Hursh, who is working with the FAA on fatigue issues, created a model for the Department of Defense to predict tiredness in soldiers.

In some cases, carriers are already using science to tailor their schedules.

The FAA's Gilligan said the agency approved a fatigue risk management plan in 2006 created by Delta Air Lines and is updating it to allow staffing changes on a flight from New York to Mumbai, which averages 16.5 hours. The FAA approved two crews of pilots, who get one short and one long break.

Gilligan said there is a mandatory 24-hour rest period before the flight and in-flight breaks are scheduled, not left up to the crew. The plan covers flight attendants as well, she said.

The agency is looking at similar scheduling plans for other carriers to be approved this year and next. Still, individually tailored plans don't address the broader issue of updating rules across the board.

In the meantime, Hursh cites one pretty reliable fatigue countermeasure: "Caffeine is a perfectly legal, relatively short-acting stimulant."

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