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EU flying rules changes raise crash risk, say pilots

Proposed changes to flying rules for airline pilots in Europe will increase the risk of plane crashes, says the British pilots' union Balpa.

The European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) has published plans to "harmonise" flying rules in the EU.

Balpa says more early starts, longer night-shifts and cuts to crew numbers to will increase pilot fatigue.

But the UK's Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) disagreed, saying the changes would still keep passengers safe.

EASA has set out its final proposal for new EU pilot fatigue rules with "30 improvements" that will replace the UK's domestic standards.

It said the proposal follows analysis of more than 50 scientific studies and consultation with flight and cabin crew organisations, airlines, and EU member states.

Executive director Patrick Goudou said: "These harmonised flight crew duty time rules are based on scientific evidence, risk assessment and best practice. With this opinion, EASA proves once again its commitment to make no compromise with the safety of air passengers in Europe and throughout the world."

Balpa says the changes for UK pilots could include:

- Double the number of early starts in a row
- Being on duty 15% more over a fortnight
- Flying longer at night
- Spending 30% longer on standby before being called for duty

"Let me be clear, this is not about pilots wanting to work less," said Balpa general secretary Jim McAuslan.

"The overall number of hours pilots will fly in a year will remain the same, but the distribution of those hours can be done in a safe, or unsafe way.

"The UK currently has the safest skies in Europe, but the government seems ready to ditch all that in favour of harmonisation. Neither pilots nor the travelling public will understand the sense in that."

The families of victims of a US air crash that was partly a result of tired pilots - Continental flight 3407 in Buffalo, New York, in 2009 - have joined the call for the UK government to reject the changes.

Mr McAuslan said that if the government did accept the new rules, it also "must commit to 'safety enhancements' to cover black holes which would otherwise be a safety reduction for the UK".

He went on: "The science tells us these rules are unsafe; the House of Commons Transport Select Committee says these rules are unsafe; thousands of pilots and safety campaigners across Europe say these rules are unsafe and now the Continental families add their voice too.

"What will it take for the UK government to pay attention?"

The UK's safety regulator, the CAA, said that overall the changes would keep passengers as safe as before.

Transport Minister Simon Burns said: "The safety of the travelling public is paramount and we have been quite clear that we would not support any proposals which the UK's aviation safety regulator - the CAA - advise do not provide sufficient protection against crew fatigue.

"We welcome EASA's final proposals which the CAA is satisfied provide a level of safety broadly equivalent to those already in place in the UK."

The new rules are expected to be adopted into EU law after mid-2013 and fully implemented by the end of 2015.