

Nearly HALF of all pilots have admitted that they have fallen asleep at the controls

- **Pilots fear new EU regulations would allow them to land a plane after up to 22 hours without sleep**

By [Ray Massey, Transport Editor](#)

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Nearly half of pilots say they have fallen asleep at the controls, it emerged yesterday.

The alarming admission came as union leaders warned MPs that even more passengers' lives will be put at risk due to new European rules that could allow pilots to land their aircraft after 22 hours without sleep.

The change – to 'harmonise' flying hours – poses 'a danger to public safety' and must not be adopted by the UK, the British Airline Pilots' Association warned the House of Commons Transport Committee yesterday.

Its research claims that the proposals will leave pilots 'drunk with fatigue' – as if they had consumed five cans of lager and were four times over the legal limit for flying.

Balpa's head of safety, Dr Rob Hunter, told MPs that its own poll showed 43 per cent of pilots had fallen asleep on the flight deck – but said this was 'probably an underestimation'.

Asked if the EU changes would lead to more accidents, Dr Hunter replied: 'I would say so.'

He added that competition among airlines was so intense it could lead to skimping on safety.

‘If airlines spend on safety today, they might go out of business tomorrow,’ he said.

The pilots’ union is concerned that the Civil Aviation Authority appears to be supporting the flying time rules from the EU’s European Aviation Safety Agency when it should be demanding an opt-out.

Before the meeting, Balpa general secretary Jim McAuslan said: ‘The Government have to answer this question: “Is it safe to land an aircraft after 22 hours [without sleep]?” If not, they need to reject these EU proposals now and keep the current UK rules in place until they have been significantly improved.’

TIREDNESS KILLS

Fatigue was seen as factor in the crash which killed 49 people in Buffalo, upstate New York, in the U.S. three years ago.

It emerged the co-pilot was paid a salary so low that she lived with her parents near Seattle and commuted across the country to her job, a combination of long travel and little money that a safety official called a "recipe for an accident".

A National Transportation Safety Board hearing then focused on whether Captain Marvin Renslow and co-pilot Rebecca Shaw were fatigued on the wintry night of February 12, 2009, when they apparently made a series of critical errors as Continental Connection Flight 3407 approached Buffalo Niagara International Airport.

The Bombardier Dash 8-Q400, a twin-engine turboprop, experienced an aerodynamic stall, rolling back and forth before plunging into a house below.

All 49 people aboard and one on the ground were killed in the worst U.S. air crash in seven years.

Mr McAuslan added: ‘Twenty hours of wakefulness is far from the only part of the proposals which give us serious concern.

‘Compared with the UK’s domestic rules, the EU proposals would see pilots being able to fly further – as far as California – with no back-up crew and, contrary to scientific advice, allow pilots to do up to seven early starts in a row, which is desperately fatiguing.

‘We need the Government to say it won’t support this danger to public safety, and will demand that we either get the proposals to a much safer position, or retain our own domestic rules.’

Kris Major, of the Unite union, said the proposals would lead to a 17 per cent increase in pilots’ workloads.

And there is a five-and-a-half times higher chance of an accident when duty periods exceed 13 hours, according to Jon Horne, executive board director of the European Cockpit Association.

But the Civil Aviation Authority rejected any suggestion that the controversial EU rules would compromise safety.

Captain Tim Price, of British Airways, insisted airlines were not prioritising profits and that safety was the responsibility of the airline and the captain flying on that particular day.

Aviation minister Theresa Villiers claimed there would be ‘significant safety gains’ from the European proposals.

She said the EU plans would ‘broadly’ bring the whole of the continent up to UK levels and would not see a ‘levelling down’ of standards.