

Passengers at risk from plans to increase pilots' working hours, committee hears

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Image: Screengrab

ORGANISATIONS REPRESENTING AIRPLANE pilots have warned that passengers could be at risk under new EU plans to lengthen pilots' working hours.

Proposals from the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) for Europe-wide safety standards would increase working hours for pilots and put the safety risk for passengers "unacceptably high" representatives from the Irish Airline Pilots Association (IALPA) told an Oireachtas committee today.

Representatives from IALPA, the British Airline Pilots Association, and the European Cockpit Association briefed members of the Oireachtas Environment, Transport, Culture and the Gaeltacht committee about the EASA proposals.

The committee heard that a UK study had shown that 43 per cent of pilots reported falling asleep at the flight deck of a plane. In many instances this was not recorded.

"Fatigue is a real threat to aviation safety, a tired pilot is a dangerous pilot," air accident investigator and IALPA safety and technical director Paul Cullen told the committee.

EASA plans would require pilots operating in Europe to fly up to 16 hours per day with anything over 13 hours considered to increase the risk of fatigue in pilots.

The proposals would also see that the number of hours a pilot could fly during night time increased to 11 hours, against scientific studies which say that 10 hours should be the limit, the representative groups told the committee.

Cullen argued that American aviation regulators had imposed stricter limits on pilots' working hours, leaving what he referred to in one graph as the North Atlantic Safety Gap:



In his presentation to the committee he said that a pilot could wake up at 5am, report for airport standby at 7am, be required for a flight at 11am and would be due back at 1am.

If the flight is delayed it could add a further two hours, meaning a pilot could be awake for 22 hours.

"They're (EASA) placing a bet that everything will be okay," he said, arguing that the European passengers deserve the same protection as American passengers, later adding: "We've already had seven decades of science that has been ignored."

IALPA president Evan Cullen told the committee that though the EASA proposals would mandate a pilot could fly a maximum of 900 hours per year, working out at 18 hours per week, this would mean that a full day spent travelling to London from Dublin and back could account for just four or five of these 18 hours.

He said that it would be like saying "the only time a TD is working is when he is standing up in the Dáil."

Robert Hunter, the head of safety at BALPA, said that fatigue in flying could pose a number of risks to a pilot's ability to react to events in the cockpit, scan the instruments in front of him or her and pay attention to warnings.

“A pilot’s situational awareness is very dependent on the scanning process,” he told the committee saying that the speed at which information is processed would be affected by fatigue.

He said proposals from EASA could see pilots being awake for periods going up to 22 hours. He said: “The risk is that they’ll be too slow to see something or consider decisions too narrowly.”

He and other members of the delegation referred back to a [recent report by a UK parliamentary select committee](#) which said of the EASA proposals: “There is a clear risk that these proposals will invite further fatigue amongst aircrew.”

Dr Phillip von Schoppenthau, General Secretary of the European Cockpit Association, said that under the proposals being made by EASA, a number of countries would see their current safety levels actually go down.

“This is something which is of serious concern to us,” he told the committee, later adding: “Let’s have rules which are solidly based on scientific evidence.”

Evan Cullen also told the committee that the Irish Aviation Authority (IAA) was not operating “best practice” in the way it is currently constructed.

He suggested it should be broken into two elements whereby the commercial element of the IAA was kept separate from the safety and regulatory aspect which would not be commercially based.