

Air passengers' lives will be put at risk, pilots warn

Pilots fear EU plans to relax British flying rules will endanger lives through longer shifts and increased fatigue



A pilot waits in the departure lounge of Heathrow airport in London. Pilots fear that proposed new rules would lower safety standards. Photograph: Stefan Wermuth/Reuters
Gwyn Topham

The Guardian, Tue 21 Feb 2012 18.00 GMT

Air passengers' lives will be put at risk by EU proposals to relax British flying rules, the pilots' association, Balpa, has warned.

Pilots will tell a parliamentary hearing on Wednesday of their concerns at regulations that would allow them to land a plane after up to 22 hours without sleep. Changes to shift patterns and reduced crew requirements on certain long-haul flights will likewise raise the chances of pilots falling asleep in the cockpit, they say.

The European Aviation Safety Agency (Easa) is proposing to harmonise safety rules across the continent, with its current consultation expected to lead to EU policy later this year. Balpa says the proposals fall short of current British practice and has called on the UK regulator, the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA), to resist.

Jim McAuslan, Balpa general secretary, said the planned rules would, "contrary to scientific advice, allow pilots to do up to seven early starts in a row, which is desperately fatiguing.

"The government has to answer this question: 'Is it safe to land an aircraft after 22 hours?' If not, they need to reject these EU proposals now."

Louise Ellman MP, chair of the Commons transport committee, said: "We've received representations that this could be putting people's lives at risk. We're looking at it from a public safety point of view. Aviation has a very good safety record here and we need to keep it."

However, the CAA says the moves are welcome. A spokesman said: "Not every British citizen leaves on a British airline: many are flying to places with little flight-time limitation. Easa are looking to make the European baseline more restrictive – and in the pilots' favour." He said the latest version of the proposals would incorporate European maximum working hours and a new requirement making airlines legally responsible for managing any pilot fatigue.

"We are satisfied that, as a complete package, it provides an equivalent level of safety to the current regime. If you take Europe as a whole, for lots of pilots it will mean fewer hours."

British Airways said that while some parts of the European Aviation Safety Agency's proposals were more permissive, as a whole, with proper regulatory oversight, the new rules would raise safety standards.

However, Rob Hunter, head of safety at Balpa, said there were no guarantees that mandated rest time for pilots meant sleep. "The jargon is 'airport standby' – this is not a bedroom. They could start their duty at 11am and could potentially be landing a plane at 3am the next day." He also criticised proposals to allow only two pilots instead of three on flights of up to 14 hours, extended from 12 – affecting long-haul flights to the west coast of America from London. A Balpa/ComRes survey found that 43% of pilots had inadvertently fallen asleep in the cockpit, and almost a third of those had awoken to find their co-pilot asleep. While some airlines do allow for a napping captain *in extremis*, Hunter said: "Our view is that both pilots need to be alert on the deck at all times."

The US Federal Aviation Authority last December published new rules on flight times in the wake of a 2009 plane crash in Buffalo, where pilot fatigue was identified as a factor in an incident that killed 50 people.