

February 12, 2014 4:00 AM  
*National Review*

## The Pilot Shortage Made in Congress

A hastily drafted, heavy-handed safety rule is causing major problems for air travel.  
By [Jillian Kay Melchior](#)



Five years ago this month, two pilots aboard Colgan Air Flight 3407 made a series of fatal errors as they descended near Buffalo, N.Y. The plane spluttered in mid-air, tilting unnaturally, then made a terrible grinding sound as it fell near-vertical from the sky. It hit a house, exploding loudly; neighbors could see the flames from blocks away. All 49 people aboard the flight perished, as did one occupant of 6038 Long Street, which was totally destroyed.

Tragedies trigger calls for action. Unfortunately, such pleas are often more emotional than rational, resulting in bad policy. The legislation passed in response to the Colgan plane crash is a classic example.

In direct response to the Colgan crash, Congress passed the Airline Safety and FAA Extension Act of 2010, which mandated that the Federal Aviation Administration require pilots to complete 1,500 flight hours before they're allowed to fly commercially, up from just 250 before the act. While this new rule does little to improve safety, it is exacerbating an already severe pilot shortage.

Boeing [predicted recently](#) that over the next 20 years, the global economy will demand 498,000 new commercial airline pilots. Already, many existing pilots are inching toward the mandatory

retirement age, says Kent Lovelace, chair of aviation at the University of North Dakota. Even though Congress has changed the mandatory retirement age from 60 to 65, over the next decade around half of America's 54,000 pilots will age out of the profession.

Meanwhile, too few pilots are available to replace the ones who are retiring. A historically low number of people are training to become pilots, and of those, only half are seeking a career with commercial airlines, Lovelace says. For many would-be pilots, the consideration is purely financial: While flight training costs between \$60,000 and \$70,000, entry-level pilot positions typically pay \$25,000 a year or less. Furthermore, the financial turbulence that's characterized the airline industry since September 11, 2001, has made the profession less attractive to aspiring aviators.

The existing workforce has been stretched even thinner by new anti-fatigue rules. Pilots were once required to have eight hours of time off between shifts, but now they must be given no less than ten hours. This particular anti-fatigue rule was empirically justifiable, and it may well improve safety, but it also results in airlines' needing between 3 and 7 percent more pilots on the clock at any given time.

Together, these considerations have created a perfect storm for the airline industry, and, as [major news sources](#) have [recently noted](#), the pilot shortage is beginning even faster than expected.

In that context, the new 1,500-flight-hour requirement is particularly harmful. Both pilots involved in the Colgan crash had far surpassed 1,500 hours of flight time, so it wouldn't have prevented the accident. And the new requirement is all the worse because, as Lovelace says, it was "not based on science," but was rather "a political decision. And it doesn't matter whether you think it's good or not. The only way it's going to change is literally an act of Congress."

As Congress considered the requirement, Senator Chuck Schumer (D., N.Y.) didn't hesitate to trot out the surviving families of Colgan victims. "Every time there was a legislative blockage, we sent them to personally go talk to the senators involved, and every time, they broke through," Schumer recently told a Gannett reporter.

But this tear-jerking approach to policymaking wholly ignores the facts. The Colgan crash, however horrific, was an extraordinary outlier.

Before the new flight-time rules for pilots kicked in, plane travel was already the safest it had been in the entire history of aviation. By the latest airline-industry count, there's only one major accident for every 5 million flights on Western-built jets. Even in plane crashes, 95.7 percent of passengers survive, as CNN has reported. The *New York Times* has reported that "in the last five years, the death risk for passengers in the United States has been one in 45 million flights."

Such bad policy has real consequences, which are already playing out. Last summer in my hometown of Cheyenne, Wyo., the tiny regional airport had to temporarily suspend 30 working pilots because they had not yet met the 1,500-hour requirement. And earlier this month, it announced it was suspending service to six airports because it couldn't find enough pilots who met the FAA standards.

Those who once would have flown out of Cheyenne will now be forced to commute to Denver International Airport, about two hours' drive away. Perhaps some of them will forgo air travel altogether and take a road trip. Keep in mind that between January and June 2013, 15,470 people died in motor-vehicle crashes in the United States; in 2012, only 475 people worldwide died in plane crashes (in comparison, the World Health Organization has reported that 1.24 million people across the world died in car crashes last year). Globally, fewer people die from air travel than die by using right-handed equipment when you're a lefty, especially when it's a power saw; by being crushed by televisions or furniture; or by getting a brain-eating parasite.

Though well-intentioned, the new rule does more harm than good, creating an additional and altogether unnecessary barrier to entry for much-needed pilots. Such are the perils of legislation by emotional reaction.