

**National Public Radio**  
**Airlines Fear Pilot Shortage Amid New Federal Safety Rules**

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ROBERT SIEGEL, HOST:

Airlines are also facing big questions in 2013. Some, especially the smaller ones, worry that they won't have enough pilots.

As NPR's Wendy Kaufman explains, that's because of a number of factors, including new federal safety rules.

WENDY KAUFMAN, BYLINE: In February of 2009, a Colgan Air commuter jet crashed, killing 50 people. Investigators cited inadequate pilot training and Congress responded with new legislation. Beginning next summer, those who want to pilot commercial jets will need more hours of flight training before they can be hired.

ROGER COHEN: The issue here is this arbitrary 1500 hours.

KAUFMAN: That's Roger Cohen, head of the Regional Airline Association. He notes the new regulation is roughly triple the number of hours many commuter airlines require today. And he says it will mean lots of otherwise qualified pilots won't be able to get jobs.

COHEN: These people have already invested incredible amount of time and incredible amount of money investing in their aviation education. They've just been told you have to now go back out and just fly around in circles, at your own expense, just to get hourly experience.

KAUFMAN: Cohen says most people now in training programs can't get enough hours in before the deadline. So the pipeline for new pilots will be smaller. Any impact would be felt largely at the regional or commuter airlines because that's where pilots often begin their commercial career.

Cohen can't say when the regional airlines might face an acute shortage of pilots, but warns when they do, flights will be cancelled and service to some communities will be cut, though others say Cohen is overstating his case.

Still, there's no question the industry is facing some headwinds with respect to pilots.

KIT DARBY: The retirements start tomorrow.

KAUFMAN: Kit Darby, an aviation industry consultant, says thousands of pilots are closing in on the mandatory retirement age of 65. And military pilots - who used to flock to the nations airlines - are staying in the military longer or not leaving at all, in part because of their pay.

DARBY: Its quite a bit better than it used to be and it's competitive. It's a good base pay. You're going to be in the, you know, 75,000 range. And then there's all kinds of bonuses that could raise that well up over a hundred.

KAUFMAN: And that's a lot more than new commercial pilots make.

Another source for commercial pilots is also shrinking. The number of people getting private pilot licenses has fallen sharply. Education and training is expensive and getting more so.

What's more, Kent Lovelace - who chairs the well regarded aviation program at the University of North Dakota - says the allure of being a pilot isn't what it used to be. He says in the past, 75 percent or more of his students aspired to be commercial pilots. Now it's only about half.

KENT LOVELACE: They value friends, family. Those kinds of lifestyles issues in many ways are more important than money. So they look at the challenge of being away from home roughly half of the month, and they don't look at it as a positive.

KAUFMAN: And Captain Lee Moak, head of the Airline

Pilots Association, says those who do want to fly commercial jets are increasingly being wooed by foreign airlines.

CAPTAIN LEE MOAK: We have a lot of our newly-trained, newly-certificated pilots coming out of school and going overseas because the pay is better there. We haven't seen that before.

KAUFMAN: Some industry officials are now pushing the federal government to put more money into pilot education. And airlines are beginning to consider subsidizing flight training, in exchange for a commitment by the students to go to work for them.

Wendy Kaufman, NPR News.