

Unified Stance Needed To Challenge 1,500-Hr. Rule, Airlines Say

By Sean Broderick | May 4, 2022

ORLANDO, Florida—Convincing U.S. lawmakers to revisit the 2010 law that required the FAA to boost minimum flight hours for airline pilots to 1,500 hr. will require a unified push backed with data to support revised standards, executives from two major carriers said.

“No single carrier is going to be able to fight this battle,” JetBlue University VP Jeffrey Winter said during the World Aviation Training Symposium (WATS) May 3. “It needs to be a [joint industry effort] to speak with a united voice.”

Airline management point to the rule, which increased the flight time needed to qualify as an air transport pilot and fly as a first officer from the previous minimum of 250 hr., as a major contributor to a worsening pilot shortage. The rule’s supporters, notably pilots unions and some key lawmakers, dispute the pilot-shortage narrative, blaming economics—namely the cost of pilot training and poor pay for new hires—as the pipeline’s biggest choke point. Supporters also cite the rule as a major safety enhancement—a position that makes the requirements politically challenging to question, despite a lack of compelling data that shows how the rule has improved safety.

Many in industry question the rule’s safety benefits, pointing to research conducted since the rule went into effect in 2013 that suggest more flying hours do not create better-qualified first officers. They also point to training requirements and airline safety records in other regions as evidence that pilots can safely fly the line with fewer than 1,500 flight hours under their belts.

“If it couldn’t be done, then a lot of the European and Asian carriers wouldn’t be able to safely operate aircraft, and the fact of the matter is they can,” Winter said.

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The main difference is how training programs are built, he added.

“When you look at how a European carrier trains, Day One is built to make you an airline pilot,” Winter said. “Everything you do is built to get you to the right seat. Obviously, for the most part here [in the U.S.], we don’t do that.”

Compiling data to demonstrate how various training approaches, including those used in other countries and the U.S. military, produce qualified pilots is key to any argument to alter the current standards, Winter said.

“There are other ways to get that flying, to get that training in a very compressed, intensive environment that I think does help you,” he added.

JetBlue is among the carriers that have discussed their concerns with the FAA.



“I think they’re sympathetic. I think they understand the data. I think they also understand the environment,” Winter said. “You do have to at least start the conversation to get things moving.”

Given that the rule came via Congressional mandate, the FAA has few options to alter it unless lawmakers revisit the issue. The agency is making other subtle changes, however.

The 1,500-hr minimum is not absolute—pilots with certain experience, such as military flying, qualify for a lower total amount. A draft rule proposed in 2017 offers several additional scenarios that would allow more types of flight time to count toward the minimum. More such rules are possible, providing additional “equivalent” ways for pilots to earn time and experience that replaces some of the 1,500 flight hours.

The rulemaking process takes time, however, and new equivalencies only chip away at the current standards. The best hope for the rule’s opponents could be a seismic shift linked to the regulations that causes significant collateral damage.

“We’ve just got to get to the point where there’s a political will to act,” United Airlines SVP of Flight Operations Brian Quigley told WATS attendees. “Unfortunately, what that typically takes is some sort of economic impact.”

A pilot shortage that hits the smallest airlines first may fit the bill.

“What you’re seeing in the country right now is that small communities are going to lose service,” Quigley said. “When that happens, and there’s enough noise, then I think Congress gets serious about it.”