

NTSB Chair Warns Against Single-Pilot Operations

Thierry Dubois | October 04, 2024

MARRAKESH, Morocco—Having two pilots onboard is a vital safety asset that reduced-crew concepts are threatening, National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) Chair Jennifer Homendy said Oct. 3.

“Technology should be used to supplement safety, not supplant expertise and judgment,” Homendy said during a keynote speech at IATA’s World Safety and Operations Conference in Marrakesh.

Homendy referred to two incidents in which the NTSB determined that the presence of two pilots—rather than just one—avoided an accident, expressing concern that some aviation actors support single-pilot operations. Given the weight of the NTSB in aviation safety matters, Homendy brought a major contribution to the debate between proponents and opponents of single-pilot operations. Airbus, Dassault Aviation and the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA), the main proponents of the concept, thus face strengthened opposition.

In one of the incidents Homendy described, a FedEx crew was conducting a Category 3 approach into Texas’ Austin-Bergstrom International Airport in February 2023. The approach procedure assumes pilots are relying solely on cockpit instruments. Due to difficult weather conditions, and the presence of traffic at the airport, the captain was nevertheless regularly looking outside the aircraft. In doing so, he prevented a runway collision, Homendy said. Separation between the FedEx aircraft and a Southwest Airlines aircraft on the runway came down to just 160 ft. The FedEx first officer said the presence of two crewmembers onboard made a difference, she noted.



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NTSB Chair Jennifer Homendy has come out in opposition to single-pilot operations.

“Think of the two close calls—imagine how much worse the two events would have been with just one pilot,” Homendy said. Some industry players suggest single-pilot operations would save money without compromising safety, she noted, without explicitly naming Airbus or Dassault. “EASA is evaluating extended minimum crew operations [where the cruise phase may essentially be conducted with a single pilot in the flight deck],” she added.

Nevertheless, technology improvements should be embraced to assist pilots, she emphasized. Sufficient ground movement detection equipment could have prevented the incident in Austin, she said. “Moreover, for 42 years, the NTSB has recommended runway incursion prevention technology in the cockpit,” she stressed. “We must provide pilots with improved situational awareness technology. That’s the redundancy aviation is so well known for.”