

FAA Chief Reiterates Agency's Stance Against Reduced-Crew Operations

Sean Broderick September 11, 2024



Credit: American Airlines

WASHINGTON—FAA leadership has no intention of changing the agency's longstanding position that reduced crew operations (RCO) will not be permitted in updates to rules and guidance that currently mandate two pilots on the flight deck during all routine flight operations, Administrator Mike Whitaker said.

"It's the law of the land, and I intend for it to stay the law of the land," Whitaker told attendees of the 68th Air Line Pilots Air Safety Forum Sept. 11.

The FAA's position stands in contrast to the European Union [Aviation Safety](#) Agency (EASA), which is studying two concepts in response to requests from Airbus and Dassault.

In late 2023, EASA issued a rulemaking task on extended minimum crew operations, often referred to as RCO, which envisions permitting one pilot at the controls during "noncritical" segments of a flight's cruise phase, the task's summary explained. EASA has received at least one formal application from a manufacturer to approve the concept.

The rulemaking task focuses on operational changes that would permit only one pilot on the flight deck during specific scenarios.

The work, which gets underway with formal meetings later this year, could pave the way for pilots to sleep without being relieved by a reserve pilot—seemingly a cost-savings opportunity for airlines.

Manufacturers and operators see RCO as another fatigue-management tool. Some regulators allow one flight crew member to take a short rest on the flight deck while the other acts as pilot flying.

The FAA is not among them, however. The agency studied onboard napping 30 years ago, going as far as releasing a draft advisory circular that would have authorized it. But pushback from ALPA and other pilot unions helped stop the process. The agency's official policy: Naps are fine so long as there are two pilots on the flight deck, not counting anyone resting. In-seat naps are not permitted.

The FAA's most definitive step to date has been to agree with a Research, Engineering and Development Advisory Committee (REDAC) recommendation to develop a research plan to "be prepared with scientific data to support the processes for aircraft design and operational approvals for concepts such as Extended Minimum Crew Operations [eMCO]," the agency wrote in a formal response to REDAC in 2024.

"[It] is not the agency's responsibility to develop or mature the science and technology to enable use of the eMCO concept, but the FAA needs to be ready to apply rigorous guidance and oversight once they are approached by a stakeholder looking to implement eMCO in commercial operations," the FAA wrote.

The agency added it is "in the process of focusing our safety research plans to emphasize key strategic thrust areas related to eMCO," including focus on automation and artificial intelligence.



“The resulting foundational knowledge will support many new concepts, including eMCO,” it added.

The work going on in Europe [prompted ALPA to join forces](#) with two other pilot groups, the European Cockpit Association and International Federation of Air Line Pilots' Associations, in opposition.

Of greater concern to the unions are longer-range plans to design flight decks for just one pilot. Airbus and FedEx have already broached a single-pilot-operations (SPO) idea for future freighters.

But implementation would require new rules and changes to flight deck design—both of which will take years.

Proponents and critics have framed the debate as one about reducing labor costs by enabling fewer pilots to do the same amount of work. ALPA President Jason Ambrosi argues the issue has nothing to do with money.

“It’s not about jobs, it’s about safety,” Ambrosi said. “This is one of the biggest threats, if not the biggest threat, facing us now.”

U.S. FAA

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