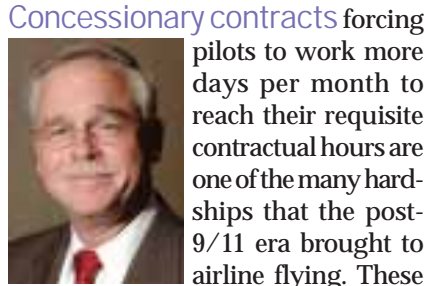




Moving Forward On Fatigue

By Capt. Chris Beebe, ALPA Vice-President-Finance/Treasurer



Concessionary contracts forcing pilots to work more days per month to reach their requisite contractual hours are one of the many hardships that the post-9/11 era brought to airline flying. These contracts have had effects on safety, fatigue, pilot quality of life, and general levels of stress. Sixteen-hour domestic duty days—even longer with some international operations—are now facts of life for many airline pilots. Irregular shifts, all-night operations, and significant circadian rhythm challenges exacerbate pilot fatigue.

That's why in the fall of 2005 Capt. Woerth asked me to chair a new ad hoc Pilot Fatigue Task Force with the goals of (1) developing a full understanding of all aspects of this issue, (2) deliberating on the potential remedies for the problem, and (3) developing a strategy to lessen pilot fatigue. The four other Task Force members were the chairmen of ALPA's Air Safety Structure and Human Performance, Flight Time/Duty Time, and Collective Bargaining Committees. Staff support was provided by ALPA's Engineering & Air Safety, Legal, Communications, Government Affairs, Representation, and Economic & Financial Analysis Departments, plus the ALPA Aeromedical Office.

A great deal has been learned about human physiology, fatigue, and what constitutes a safe schedule since "Schedule with Safety" became the Association's mission and motto in 1931. The sad reality is that this knowledge has not been put to best use, as many airlines' current scheduling practices—all of which are "legal" in the eyes of the FAA and Transport Canada—grind pilots down.

One universal scientific finding worth noting is that pilots cannot

counter fatigue merely through better training, as some airlines insist. While pilots can take measures to help stay awake (moving around, drinking coffee), the only way to genuinely reduce fatigue is through restful, uninterrupted sleep. That's why shorter duty days and longer rest periods are so critical in preventing fatigue's inebriating effects.

Over the past year, the Task Force met

Management will always be clever in improvising new ways to abuse our schedules. This time around, we must make those practices relics of the past.



numerous times to review scientific literature, and discuss, investigate, and debate the issue of pilot fatigue, its causes, and solutions. In addition to the group's deliberations, in December 2005 the Task Force created an online poll on pilot fatigue, in which 12,499 pilots participated, to gauge members' views on this important subject.

A second, scientifically stratified telephone poll in late July verified the Task Force's conclusions and recommendations. One of the more telling outcomes of these polls is the significant increase in the percentage of pilots who report being fatigued by the end of their assigned trip pairings, as compared to levels reported in previous polls.

Shortly after the Task Force began its work, Flight Time/Duty Time Committee members met to discuss some of the worst scheduling practices, such as stand-up overnights and use of parked airplanes as "sleeping facili-

ties." A major topic was the Preferential Bidding System (PBS), which sparked intense debate. To address pilot concerns, the Committee held a special meeting with PBS vendors in January 2006 to begin creating a better understanding of how those systems can benefit, or harm, the quality of crew rotations and fatigue levels.

The Task Force recently completed its work and provided its findings to ALPA's Board of Directors meeting in Las Vegas. Given the current U.S. political environment, I do not expect any regulatory changes to the Part 121 flight and duty rules in the near future, and pilot education helps only so much.

Instead, the Task Force recommended a national fatigue strategy that focuses on providing each MEC with the tools and information needed to properly review and evaluate its schedules and to improve those schedules through negotiation and the collective bargaining process. Significantly, the ALPA National Flight Time/Duty Time Committee is already planning to hold workshops for MEC scheduling and negotiating committee members to provide a forum for exchanging information and ideas and developing solutions.

Although the Fatigue Task Force's work is done, implementation of ALPA's fatigue-reduction strategy, to be shepherded by the Collective Bargaining Committee and the Flight Time/Duty Time Committee, has just begun. As master executive councils, some of which have initiated their own fatigue-mitigation studies, begin using the tools and methods that make up the new strategy, onerous scheduling practices will become a target for change as we emerge from the bankruptcy/concessionary negotiating era. Management will always be clever in improvising new ways to abuse our schedules. This time around, we must make those practices relics of the past. 🌐