

## REGIONAL AVIATION THREATENED

Regional air service constantly has to deal with a barrage of obstacles that threaten its very existence. The constantly increasing operating costs and the critical shortage of manpower are unfortunately adding to the flagrant inefficiency of government services, interest groups with narrow blinders, and laws and regulations disconnected from the realities of air operations.

The shock of the pandemic was enormous. The number of air passengers enplaned and deplaned in Canada fell from 162,864,077 in 2019 to 46,163,940 in 2021, a drop of 72% overall, but an 85% drop in cross-border passengers and an 87% drop in the number of international passengers. An industry that was able to survive after seeing its clientele evaporate in a few weeks without governments making the slightest effort to ensure the sustainability of air service is certainly worthy of praise.

Commercial aviation, whether regional, national or international, today faces a lot of unknowns. The use of online conferencing platforms has become commonplace, and this will certainly have a yet-to-be measured impact on the demand for business travel. Also to be considered is that any increase in the cost of air travel will negatively influence the demand for leisure travel.

The government's shameful indifference to the plea for financial relief during the pandemic by NAV CANADA, as an uncontested essential service for aviation safety, has resulted in a significant increase in costs to carriers. We are also witnessing a wave of increases in airport fees across the country, including increases in Airport Improvement Fees for passengers in many airports. All these increases inevitably directly translate into ticket price increases for passengers, which will undoubtedly affect the demand for air transport, while reducing the services offered to Canadians.

The array of fee increases for carriers and their passengers also threatens the profitability of certain routes. The difficulty in predicting the real impact on travel demands also complicates the choice of aircraft to be put into service or to order when modernizing the fleet.

The situation only gets worse when you add to this poisonous mix a purely politically motivated intent, focused on public opinion, to further tighten the Air Passenger Protection Regulations, on top of a quality of service from Transport Canada that has sunk to levels never seen before.

The critical shortage of pilots and maintenance personnel could

ground parts of the fleet, thus reducing the offer of air transport services, especially in regional transport, the sector hardest hit by the shortage. It is unfathomable that some observers still deny the existence of a pilot shortage as it is arguably the single greatest threat to our industry today.

It is incomprehensible that the government has refused to extend the deadline for implementing the new fatigue management regulations for smaller carriers. This is exacerbating the already disastrous pilot shortage by requiring up to 30% more pilots to maintain the current level of service. The entry into force of these regulations in 2020 for the largest carriers has provided ample evidence of the impact on the demand for pilots. ATAC wrote to the minister pleading for special consideration while the industry is still recovering. The response received from the department instead encouraged us to rely on fatigue risk management systems, the very same department that already admitted this solution is still not yet well suited for smaller carriers or in fact for most large carriers either. Large carriers, also suffocated by this shortage, will not hesitate to recruit pilots from smaller carriers to meet their needs, leaving smaller operators, the first in the chain hardest hit by the shortage, struggling to find qualified pilots. The problem does not end here as flight instructors are then solicited as a source of experienced pilots, leaving the grass roots of aviation short.

No single organization carries all the blame for this critical situation. Throughout Canada, airports, large and small, are no longer content to merely limit the activities of flight schools but are seeking to eliminate them altogether. Unsurprisingly, none of these stakeholders will accept any blame whatsoever when activities drop at their airport due to a lack of pilots.

All these elements, to name a few, threaten the very survival of regional air transport in Canada, where the service offered is already fragile. The federal government will not be able to deflect some of the blame when Canadians in remote and northern regions find themselves with severely limited services, reducing their quality of life.

It is imperative that we develop a national air transport plan that will unite all aviation stakeholders in Canada towards the goal of maintaining an efficient, viable, sustainable and safe air transport system.



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