

STATEMENT OF SENATOR SLADE GORTON
CHAIRMAN, AVIATION SUBCOMMITTEE
SENATE COMMITTEE ON
COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION
AVIATION SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING
ON THE IMPACT OF PILOT SHORTAGES ON
RURAL AIR SERVICE
JULY 25, 2000

This afternoon's hearing will address a potentially significant problem that is affecting air service to rural and smaller communities. Although airline deregulation has been greatly beneficial for most consumers, there are areas of the country that struggle to get quality air service. Such markets tend to be fragile because the airlines serving them operate on thin profit margins. Airlines, like most businesses, go where the customers are. By definition, small towns and remote communities have few potential passengers to offer an air carrier. As a result, air service tends to be infrequent and expensive.

Air travel is no longer the luxury form of transportation that it was before deregulation. It is a form of mass transit that many have grown to depend upon. That dependence seems to be inversely proportional to the size of the market. The smaller the community, the more essential air transportation can be. This is especially the case in the western United States where small towns can be separated by great distances. When a marginal market is adversely affected by outside factors, it makes the situation all the more difficult. Such is the case with pilot shortages.

When speaking of such shortages, it is important to be clear. There are many pilots in the United States, and many more individuals who want to be pilots. The problem arises when an airline cannot find qualified and trained pilots. Major airlines have almost no difficulty finding such pilots. The big air carriers offer salaries, benefits, and career opportunities that make recruiting relatively easy. With the domestic economy doing well over the past few years, the nation's airlines have been growing significantly, causing the industry to hire a considerable number of pilots. The heavy demand for pilots by the major airlines has a significant impact on regional airlines because the majors frequently poach the flight crews of the regionals. Although major airlines have always hired pilots away from smaller carriers, the current rate of attrition may be greater than ever before.

There are numerous reports of how pilot attrition among smaller carriers has caused canceled flights. That is why Senator Burns and others have become deeply concerned. He chaired a field hearing in Montana last year that began exploring this problem. Since that time, it does not appear that the situation has changed, except perhaps to get worse. Although my home State of Washington has remote towns, we are fortunate to have quality air service at major airports in the western and eastern parts of the State. Other States do not have that luxury.

Potential solutions to this problem are not clear. I know that Senator Murkowski, who will be speaking in a moment, has introduced a bill intended to ease the situation. He proposes changing the mandatory retirement age for pilots from 60 years of age to 65. The so-called Age 60 Rule has been controversial since it was first adopted in 1959. The question of how old is too old is not easily answered. Any age restriction is going to be arbitrary to some degree. Changing the Age 60 Rule would undoubtedly expand the pool of potential pilots, but we must be careful not to do so if it increases the risk of flying for the public.

I look forward to hearing more about the problem and possible solutions from our witness. Also, I thank Senator Burns for requesting this hearing. He deserves much credit for bringing this issue to national attention on behalf of his constituents and the many others who are affected by the problem.