

Testimony of Capt. Steve Dickson
Senior Vice President of Flight Operations at Delta Air Lines
Before the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation
Subcommittee on Aviation
Hearing on Aviation Safety
August 6, 2009

Mr. Chairman-

I want to thank you and the Ranking Member for holding this hearing. All of us in the airline industry have as our first responsibility every day and on every flight – to get you and all of our customers to their destinations safely. We know our customers also want to arrive on time and on schedule, but first and foremost, safely. It is a straightforward goal, but underlying that objective is a complex set of processes that have been developed over time and provide a remarkable platform for success in the US aviation industry.

We also recognize when an accident occurs, it is a true tragedy, not only for the loved ones and crew members on that flight but for the entire aviation industry. I have been involved in aviation for over 30 years and in the airline business for almost 20 years. As the Senior Vice President of Flight Operations and a Delta 767 captain, I am responsible for Delta's 12,400 pilots flying in the mainline operation. Additionally, I oversee Delta's day-to-day flight operations, as well as pilot training, pilot standards, technical support, pilot staffing and scheduling, as well as our quality assurance/compliance functions. I also serve on Delta's Operations Council. Prior to joining Delta, I graduated from the US Air Force Academy and flew F-15s in the Air Force and fully appreciate the importance of high level safety standards. Today, I am a member of the IATA Operations Committee, serve as Chairman of the ATA Operations Council, Chairman of the RTCA NextGen Implementation Task Force and Chair of the Air Traffic Management Advisory Committee (ATMAC).

Delta currently operates more than 2500 flights per day as part of our mainline operation and 3500 per day through our 9 regional operators – all under the umbrella of Delta Connection. We continuously and closely monitor all 6000 flights per day as safety in this industry is not a competitive issue for us but rather a collaborative one where we share best practices with each other as a routine matter. We all feel the loss when an accident occurs.

The hearing's letter of invitation captured the issue at hand most succinctly: "While the U.S. aviation industry is experiencing the safest period in its history, the tragic accident of Flight 3407 on February 12, 2009 reminds us that we must continually examine and constantly improve aviation safety." *This is absolutely true.*

At Delta, we are continuously driving enhancements to our safety programs not only for our mainline operations but with all nine of our regional affiliates at Delta Connection. Oversight plays a critical role in aviation safety – Congressional, Administrative and internal oversight all continue to drive home the simple objective – safety is first.

In June, we saw considerable focus on the importance of improving regional airline safety, including this Committee's hearings, as well as Secretary LaHood and Administrator Babbitt meeting with carriers and pilot unions to review specific areas to achieve improvements. Following the meeting with industry leaders, the Administrator sent a letter to each carrier seeking policy changes on pilot records. The letter also announced regional safety forums and asked each carrier to implement Flight Operations Quality Assurance (FOQA) and Aviation Safety Action Programs (ASAP) (which we have done at Delta and are in the process of implementing at all Delta Connection carriers). We support and strongly endorse Administrator Babbitt's actions and are working with the FAA on these important initiatives.

I want to add that as the Aviation Rulemaking Committee initiative moves forward, we are working directly with the FAA on safety issues through a wide web of safety working groups. Delta personnel are active members on many industry safety groups. This is an ongoing process for us and for the FAA.

I want to address the three areas that the FAA has asked each of us to review.

1. Pilot Records Improvement Act (PRIA) at Delta

Delta has a long-standing practice of requiring pilot applicants to provide privacy waivers that allow us to perform thorough background and performance checks. This includes the voluntary disclosure of FAA records. Delta further requests information regarding any reported or unreported accidents, incidents or violations, including pending investigations. We perform an extensive review of applications based on 20 competitive factors, which exceeds FAA requirements (i.e., education, prior work experience, etc.). The applicant then completes an in-depth interview and testing process, which measures complex problem solving skills, personality characteristics and cockpit fit. Successful candidates proceed to a medical exam, psychological evaluation and a cognitive test suite that evaluates the individual's ability to multitask in the cockpit.

All newly hired pilots are required to complete the PRIA check prior to hiring and training. As verification of our process, in 2008, Delta passed a records review by the FAA of all PRIA checks for 2007 and 2008 new hire pilots. Delta Connection carrier pilot hiring and training systems are all conducted by the certificate holder in accordance with Part 121 and those processes are regulated and inspected by the FAA.

2. FOQA and ASAP at Delta

Delta has existing ASAP and FOQA programs. These programs have been expanded beyond Pilots and Flight Operations, to include Dispatch, Maintenance and Load Planners, totaling nearly 20,000 employees. Particularly, our Delta Connection carriers have safety program elements such as ASAP and FOQA, as well as

IOSA registration, DOD certification, safety management systems, and special winter operating programs. While these programs are deemed voluntary under FAA rules, we work with our regional carriers to ensure they are successful in implementing, managing and overseeing these enhancements. We believe all of our regional carrier partners should have FOQA, ASAP, IOSA and DOD certifications.

Our data analysis process supporting all these programs is strong, with closed loop processes that directly provide feedback to the appropriate training programs. Utilizing our pilot training data and audits, ASAP, FOQA and employee reports, we understand that no one system provides a clear picture of an issue but instead combine this data enabling us to see trends develop. Today, these multiple data sources allow us to analyze trends and achieve a proactive safety management system.

3. Regional Carrier Oversight

At Delta, we ensure that the certificated 121 regional carriers flying as Delta Connection carriers have robust operations and safety programs. Our nine regional carrier partners represent a substantial percentage of our available seat miles and it is our job to set the standards for our carriers. Under the DOT and FAA regulatory system, each regional carrier has the responsibility under its Certificate of Public Convenience and Necessity to manage its Part 121 operations. That legal responsibility, under our regulatory structure, rests with the designated leadership of each certificated carrier. Therefore, we do not, and cannot, directly manage our regional partners' safety and quality issues. Delta does go to great lengths to ensure that these carriers flying our passengers have a solid safety record and fully comply with all Part 121 regulations.

Delta assumes the responsibility to closely monitor all levels of the operation. In fact, we believe the oversight function is so important that two of our senior officers, both of who report to Delta's COO, directly oversee our regional partners' operations and safety programs. We require our regional partners to fully comply with Part 121 regulations. In addition, we are requiring all of our regional partners to operate with FOQA, ASAP,

IOSA and DOD Programs and Standards. We closely oversee their operations by requiring a standard dashboard of safety metrics and reporting similar to the methodology we employ at mainline Delta.

Specifically:

- A. The Delta Connection Carriers have committed to achieving the highest levels of safety in accordance with the Delta standards.
- B. The Delta Connection Carriers are implementing a common set of safety programs and metrics.
- C. We hold monthly meetings with all Delta Connection Carriers to review operational, safety and regulatory performance. Our standing monthly agenda includes a review of top-level safety performance metrics that are common among all carriers, review of safety investigations and our quality audit and safety reporting programs, review of each carrier's response to FAA Safety Alerts and discussion on common strategies to mitigate current industry safety risks.
- D. We will include contractual language in our Delta Connection Airline Services Agreements regarding the operational and safety requirements to be a Delta Connection Carrier.

Finally, I want to add that while the airline industry has the best safety record of any mode of transportation, even one avoidable accident is too many. As we are sitting here, the FAA has commenced a Call to Action conference in Atlanta today. Delta has sent its key leadership to the meeting as we all seek to improve safety. In fact, until I received your invitation a few days ago, I had planned to lead our delegation at that meeting. We look forward to working with you, Mr. Chairman, and this Committee, as well as the Administrator, to see that necessary upgrades to our safety programs are made. Our customers, our industry and our nation deserve nothing less.