



House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Hearing:

**Critical Lapses in FAA Safety Oversight of Airlines: Abuses of
Regulatory "Partnership Programs"**

Statement for the Committee Record
Submitted by the Southwest Airlines Pilots' Association

April 3, 2008

Chairman Oberstar, Ranking member Mica, and members of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, the Southwest Airlines Pilots' Association (SWAPA) is an independent union representing the 5,607 pilots of Southwest Airlines. As pilots we consider the safety of our passengers and crew our highest priority and are proud of our safety record, which is second to none in the industry.

While flying the public in his Boeing 737, the Southwest Airlines pilot is at the front line of safety for the passengers, the crew, and the airline as a whole. A pilot at Southwest trusts his airplane to be the best in the world and would not fly it if he thought otherwise. The trust he places in his maintenance department is absolute and well deserved. It goes without saying that for the pilot, the consequences are very personal.

As a result, SWAPA is proud to have taken the lead in embracing the Safety Management Systems (SMS) approach which has been adopted by ICAO and the FAA. SMS is a shared set of assumptions, values, and proven industry best practices that enables a business, such as Southwest Airlines, engaged in high reliability and high consequence endeavors to succeed with outstanding margins of safety. Danger and risk can come in unexpected and subtle ways, since aviation incidents tend to result from the confluence of

many seemingly unrelated issues. A true safety culture puts a premium on obtaining information instead of making judgments. Much like the athlete striving for Olympic gold, SMS represents a way of thinking that places great value on a non judgmental quest for knowledge as a way to constantly improve.

A safety culture is anchored by a philosophy embraced by the top executive and effectively communicated and practiced by all in the organization. Consequently, SWAPA, through its safety department, has led the way by obtaining and providing formal training in safety management systems, developing a standard training manual and creating a dedicated human factors department to understand the complex issues surrounding how man and technology interact.

Large jet aircraft are designed to be flown by a crew of two people or more. A crew that works together and depends on each other is essential for ensuring the right information is gathered for the right decision to be made. In the same manner a safety culture cannot consist of one entity. Labor and management must be partners. They must recognize in the end they are codependent on each other and neither is expendable when safety is concerned. Trust built out of character and competence cannot come from a regulation or a fine, it must start with the chief executive and emanate throughout an organization. Such an environment can only exist if those entrusted with safety of the passengers have the tools they need create the culture of safety.

Just as MRI or CAT scan devices used by physicians, programs like the Aviations Safety Action Partnership (ASAP) and Flight Operations Quality Assurance (FOQA) allow those trained to study safety to look inside the organism that is an airline to see problems before they can metastasize into accidents. These non punitive information gathering programs are the pillars that raise the flying public to new heights in safety. Congress must ensure that these programs are supported, protected and strengthened.

The proof is in the facts: The American traveling public now flies in the safest period in the history of aviation. This is no accident. The voluntary, non punitive programs that

have been developed by safety management professionals, many of whom are pilots, are the answer.

A safety culture cannot be a paper drill. Just like this great country, it must be built on bedrock of shared values, open reporting, and a just culture. SWAPA looks forward to working together with the airline, FAA and the Congress to strengthen and improve the safety culture we believe already sets the standard for the world.

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