



ECA

European Cockpit Association

Cockpit News

Cabin Air Contamination – A Safety Issue

There has been much media attention about cabin air events recently. The German Parliament had a hearing about the issue and decided it was up to Europe to take action; whilst the European Aviation Safety Agency just published its Decision that they are not going to act. Although experts disagree on possible long-term health effects from cabin air contamination, one thing is clear: when a fume event occurs, cabin air contamination can cause short-term health effects which compromise flight safety. Whilst research and new technologies may offer solutions in the future, we should act today by reinforcing training and procedures.

Due to the design of engines in combination with bleed air systems, oil fumes may enter the air-conditioning packs and pollute cabin air. As air flowing through the bleeds is not filtered, cabin air can be contaminated by chemicals from the engine oil.

When such a fume event occurs, the crew has to follow the relevant operating procedures and checklists which stipulate the donning of the oxygen mask, assure 100% oxygen supply to operating crew and then terminate the flight as soon as possible. In order for the crew to react correctly, ECA strongly believes that pilot training on the immediate actions is to be reinforced:

- Checklist terminology 'smoke / fire / fume' should be clarified, as to non-native English speakers, it may not be obvious that fumes can be invisible. Furthermore, crews should be trained to react on an unexplained odour.
- Some checklists state the donning of oxygen masks is only necessary "if required" whilst others make it a priority and compulsory. There should be only one standard practice and ECA recommends to always don the oxygen mask during a smoke / fire / fume event. Training in the correct use of oxygen masks should also be reinforced.
- If after a fume event the crew feels unwell, they should consult a medical doctor.

ECA is aware of the continuous development of filtering systems (both from the bleed and in re-circulated air), of detectors (real time, airborne) and research on engine oil composition. Also some new airplane designs have different architecture not making use of bleed air from the engines for the air-conditioning. It will be important to evaluate the frequency of fume events in these new airplane designs and the advantages new technology may bring. In order to assist in quantifying the magnitude of the problem, ECA does believe that a comprehensive, open and centralised reporting system should be available to the crews. This would facilitate correct reporting and allow monitoring of fume events at European level.



Nico Voorbach, ECA President

Difficult times – Strong unity

As you can see, our monthly newsletter has a fresh new look: ECA has been promoting aviation safety for over 20 years and it was time to modernise our visual identity and logo, in order to support our aims and use modern ways of communication.

The financial crisis in Europe has hit the aviation industry as well, with many consequences on all our members: changes in their collective labour agreements (CLA), bankruptcies, shift towards low-fare airlines and reduced government funding. In addition, the way the European Commission is considering to further open our market to external competition from sometimes heavily subsidised carriers does not help an industry that is already in financial hardship.

The Hungarian National Carrier Malev went into bankruptcy after the European Commission demanded that the Hungarian government stop financing their airline and that Malev reimburse the subsidies they had received. This directly meant that the carrier had to stop all operations and all staff was suddenly dismissed. This triggered other airlines to fill in the gaps and increase their flights to and from Budapest. Pilots were approached by airlines such as Ryanair to sign contracts with them, but at the expense of their terms and conditions.

Cabin air contamination by chemicals from the engine oil is a known problem, but solutions do exist: improved training, procedures and reporting could help mitigate the risk. At the same time, ECA calls for further development of new technologies that can assist in further reducing the occurrence and effects of fume events. You can read more in our position paper on http://www.eurocockpit.be/sites/default/files/ECA_Position_Paper_Cabin_Air_Contamination_12_0125_F_0.pdf

Low-cost Outsourcing – A New Trend with Doubtful Benefits 2

One after the other, the ‘legacy’ carriers endeavour to establish low cost subsidiaries and outsource pilot positions. In most cases, the new low cost company posts the sign “pilot unions not admitted”. This trend represents a serious attack to Captain’s Authority and consequently to flight safety.

Pilots consider Captain’s Authority as one of the most important elements of their profession. In legal terms, this “authority” is only described in the Tokyo Convention related to the Commander’s powers to restrain or disembark persons putting in danger the safety or the security of the flight or passengers aboard. However, it is commonly admitted, based on the maritime concept of the Captain’s authority, to broaden this concept to include the responsibility of the Pilot in Command to ensure the safety of the flight, aircraft, passengers and cargo. This responsibility is defined in the ICAO annexes and in the European Regulations.

Responsibility is the key word. Responsibility cannot be exerted without authority. The pilot in command should have the means and the freedom to take the appropriate decisions. This is not always the case.

When there is a problem, a pilot needs to have a lot of confidence in him/herself e.g. to divert to another airport or to delay a flight, making any number of passengers unhappy, and lead to the company maybe having to compensate them for delays. The backing of a pilot association in those cases is a necessity for the pilot, in case he/she is challenged by the company’s management on such a safety decision.

In many of the new low-cost companies there are no independent pilot unions. These companies tend to use contract pilots who depend entirely on their managements’ satisfaction to get their contracts to be renewed. Because of this, pilots do not have any protection against attempts from commercially driven or ill-informed managements to push pilots into actions that go against their professional judgment.

In these situations, pilots are completely vulnerable because they have to take on responsibilities without full authority. If pilots take the right safety decision they have to take into account that they run the risk of being disciplined or even fired because of disobeying management instructions. At the same time, they have the obligation to take decisions based on safety or they run the risk of being disciplined or fired because of non-compliance with safety regulations.

The airlines with “pilot unions not admitted” signs may think they save problems and money. In reality however, they take a step backwards in the history of aviation and air safety.

Spain is another issue of concern. The sudden and unexpected bankruptcy of Spanair left 400 pilots unemployed. Our Member Association SEPLA is striving to help its pilots find new jobs with reasonable terms and conditions. Unfortunately it will mean that a lot of experienced pilots will leave the European region and will have to start working in the Middle East or Asia. Our thoughts go out to them and we hope they will find a solution.

Another trend we see is that airlines are taking desperate steps to decrease costs. Instead of going into constructive discussions with the employees, they unilaterally cancel the CLAs and put pressure on the employees to accept completely new ones, as we have seen with Air France and Austrian Airlines. This is unacceptable and undermines the long-lasting co-operation between airline management and their staff.

All of these events show us that we have to stand together in these times of financial burden and strive for a sustainable airline industry with high safety levels in Europe.



The European Cockpit Association is the representative body of European Pilots’ Associations. Based in Brussels, ECA represents over 38.000 pilots from across Europe.

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