



INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS

## NEWS from Fire Fighters

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# Dangerous Airport Fire/Rescue Standards Jeopardize Lives, Fire Fighters Say

## ***Senate Bill Strips House Provision Requiring FAA To Update 20-year old Airport Standards***

*Washington* –The lax safety culture of the Federal Aviation Administration extends beyond aircraft maintenance to the outdated 20-year-old FAA standards for fire and rescue operations that jeopardize lives in the event of an aircraft incident at an airport, the International Association of Fire Fighters charged today.

“The FAA has resisted modernizing its safety standards since 1988, even while air travel, the size of aircraft and the amount of fuel they carry have grown dramatically,” said IAFF President Harold Schaitberger. “As Congress reviews the FAA’s inadequate response to aircraft maintenance issues, it should also investigate the dangerous FAA fire and rescue standards at the nation’s airports.”

A bill under consideration by the Senate this week eliminates House-passed language requiring the FAA to improve its Airport Fire and Rescue Standards. The FAA already is under fire for improper aircraft inspection, which over the past several weeks has resulted in the grounding of hundreds of planes, cancelling thousands of flights, for re-inspection at four different carriers.

Airport fire fighters say the FAA’s archaic standards should at least be brought up to date with voluntary national consensus standards for response time and deployment and staffing. “We feel like we are being restricted from doing our jobs while the flying public is being placed in danger,” said Joe Conner, a fire captain who works out of Boston’s Logan Airport.

The FAA does not even require airport fire departments to rescue passengers or extinguish fires inside an aircraft on the ground, leaving that job to airline flight crews, the IAFF said. Fire fighters are only to provide a safe path for exit from the aircraft. FAA requirements to get fire equipment to a scene within 3 to 4 minutes is too slow, considering FAA’s own tests showing the fuselage of a downed plane can become deadly by that time.

“This is like an Indy 500 pit stop, in terms of how we have to respond,” Conner said. “We have to have access, more aerial equipment to get us up high enough to put out the flames, get people out of there -- all in a period of 3 minutes. The FAA standards work against us getting the job done.”

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The National Transportation Safety Board has cited inadequate staffing and access standards in several investigations of aircraft accidents, including the 1999 American Airlines crash overrunning the runway at Little Rock (Ark.) National Airport that killed 11 people and injured 110. At least one of the dead could have been saved if the airport fire department was better staffed and had access to the plane.

Airport fire departments are not required to maintain a minimum staffing level, other than the minimum number of personnel necessary to operate vehicles and meet the response times and minimum discharge rates, i.e., one or two fire fighters per vehicle. Standards set by the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) require a minimum of four fire fighters on every piece of apparatus.

“We have 3,400 responses a year to aircraft emergencies,” Conner said. “A lot of them are routine and some are serious fires. The next one could be catastrophic. The FAA standards need to be fixed now before another preventable death or injury occurs.”

Also problematic is FAA standards that permit airport operators to rely on local government to provide the primary response to hazardous materials and WMD incidents at airports, the IAFF said. At most airports, the response times of mutual aid units are significantly slower than the response times of airport fire departments. Additionally, many communities lack proper equipment and training to conduct a specialized hazardous materials response.

Under federal law, the FAA should have already updated and strengthened current airport safety standards. The National Technology Transfer and Advancement Act of 1995, Public Law 104-113, requires federal agencies to comply with national voluntary consensus standards. Current FAA airport standards fail to do so.

Schaitberger pointed out that the FAA and airport organizations and the airlines helped write the national consensus standard for airport fire fighting and worked to ensure that it is reasonable and effective. “The FAA should adopt the very minimal requirements of the NFPA national consensus standards,” he said. “The safety of the flying public depends on it.”

Airport fire fighters are available to discuss the safety standards and why the FAA’s 10-year hiatus from the real world puts commercial passengers in jeopardy.

*The International Association of Fire Fighters, headquartered in Washington, DC, represents more than 288,000 full-time professional fire fighters and paramedics who provide emergency medical response to 80 percent of the population in the United States and Canada. More information is available at [www.iaff.org](http://www.iaff.org)*

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