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IFALPA position on the return to flight operations in the wake of the eruption of Mt Eyjafjallajökull

Chertsey 20 April: In response to calls for return to flight operations in the areas affected by the ash cloud from the Mt Eyjafjallajökull eruption, The International Federation of Air Line Pilots' Associations (IFALPA) has issued the following statement:

IFALPA believes that a return to flight operations in Europe may be possible but only on the understanding that these decisions are safety rather than economically driven. Historical evidence of the effects of volcanic ash on aircraft demonstrates that this material presents a very real threat to flight safety and that consequently this threat should remain at the forefront of "return to flight" planning. Furthermore since aircraft are not certified for flight into volcanic ash, a "zero tolerance" approach to flight in areas where there are concentrations of ash must be maintained.

It is also true that past experience shows that with proper planning and implementation of flexible procedures safe flight operations in the vicinity of volcanic ash plumes is possible. An example of this being the procedures adopted in New Zealand in 1996 following the eruption of Mt. Ruapehu. That said, it should be also noted that, at present, there is a lack of data about the effect of light ash contamination on engine wear and performance. Naturally, this information is a vital part of the safety matrix and more data on is needed from engine manufacturers and research bodies.

Accordingly IFALPA argues for a return to flight based on the principle of risk minimisation. In this plan, all go-no go decisions would be made using the benefit of all available atmospheric conditions information this would include for example satellite imagery as well as short term metrological forecasts for the intended flight path. Using this data, flexible routings that will be buffered from no-fly zones by appropriate margins (measured in hundreds of miles initially) and thus allow safe flight can be predicted and used on a daily or even hourly basis.

Aircraft operated along such routings must be subject to rigorous pre and post flight inspection in order to ensure that any contamination from the ash plume was as expected and within safe limits. If any signs of ash impact are detected then the engines must be subject to internal investigation before the aircraft is released for flight.

To ensure confidence in the operational integrity of the procedure the return to flight should be phased so that initially flights only take place between city pairs forecasted to be not only entirely clear of ash for the period of flight but also separated by the significant margins detailed above.

The final and most important part of the plan is that the final "go-no go" decision must, as always, rest with the pilot in command.

In conclusion, IFALPA recognises that there are significant challenges facing the nations of Europe in creating a unified approach to a return to safe flight operations. It also notes that using controlled capacity growth to manage flights safely and efficiently will present a wide range of tough questions that will require equally tough answers. However the Federation reminds both the industry and regulators that at all times these decisions must be rooted in the technical and safety arena un-influenced by economic or political considerations.

Notes to Editors

The International Federation of Air Line Pilots' Associations represents in excess of 100,000 pilots in more than 100 countries world-wide. The mission of IFALPA is to be the global voice of airline pilots, promoting the highest level of aviation safety and security world-wide and providing services, support and representation to all of its Member Associations. See the Federation website www.ifalpa.org

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