

IFALPA highlight lithium battery carriage concerns to ICAO DG panel

On August 20, 2009, the Air Line Pilots Association, International (ALPA), sent letters to the Acting Deputy Administrator at the United States Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Agency (PHMSA) and the Director General, Transport Dangerous Goods Directorate, ASD, Transport Canada, urging a temporary ban on lithium battery shipments as cargo on aircraft until adequate rulemaking is in place. ALPA's actions were prompted by three recent serious incidents since June involving fires aboard U.S. carriers, including a fire in Minneapolis (KMSP) on August 14 that could have resulted in the loss of a widebody aircraft, had the fire not been discovered and extinguished after the aircraft had landed.

The IFALPA Dangerous Goods Committee has echoed the concerns of ALPA, and has called on the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) to take prompt, decisive steps to improve the safety of lithium battery transportation worldwide. To achieve this goal, IFALPA has submitted several working papers concerning lithium batteries for consideration at the ICAO Dangerous Goods Panel Meeting, to be held from the 5th through the 16th of October in Montreal. The working papers include proposals to:

 Eliminate exceptions for lithium batteries shipped as cargo aboard aircraft. Although lithium batteries have been involved in dozens of fires aboard aircraft, the Technical Instructions provide relief from the packaging, testing, labelling, training, acceptance check and pilot notification requirements of fully regulated dangerous goods.

 Restrict the quantity of lithium ion batteries at a single location on the aircraft. While ICAO limits the quantity of lithium ion batteries per package, an unlimited number of packages are allowed on both passenger and cargo aircraft, increasing the risk that a fire involving these batteries will overwhelm a cargo fire suppression system.

 Prohibit lithium metal batteries on all aircraft. Following a fire in 1999, the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) determined that a fire involving a single lithium metal battery would spread to an entire shipment, and that the aircraft fire suppression agent Halon would have no effect on a lithium metal battery fire. The United States banned bulk shipments of lithium metal batteries on passenger aircraft in 2004. The IFALPA proposal would extend this ban to both passenger and cargo aircraft worldwide.

 Increase the required hazard communication at cargo acceptance points to include information specific to lithium battery shipments.

The ICAO Dangerous Goods Panel will be voting on these and other lithium battery proposals during the upcoming Panel Meeting.