



National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C. 20594

OCT 30 2009

Office of the Chairman

Captain John H. Prater
President
Air Line Pilots Association, International
1625 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20036

Dear Captain Prater:

Thank you for your letter of October 29, 2009, regarding the National Transportation Safety Board's (NTSB) ongoing investigation of the incident involving Northwest Airlines flight 188. In your letter, you expressed concern that the NTSB's release of factual information was influenced by pressure from the news media. You also expressed concern that such a release promotes premature conclusions and is counter to the goal of voluntary safety reporting programs. While appreciating your concerns, we view these issues differently.

The NTSB has a long history of releasing factual information, including information from our interviews with flight crews and others, usually starting the first day the investigative team arrives on scene. Experience has demonstrated that the release of factual information greatly reduces media speculation and the uninformed assessments of those commenting on the accident. This is not a concession to the media but an attempt to provide the public accurate information about a matter of significant public concern—transportation safety. The NTSB perceives this as an obligation.

In the case of our investigation into the circumstances of flight 188, which occurred October 21, we interviewed the crew at their earliest opportunity, October 25, and released a detailed account of those interviews on October 26. During the 5 days that elapsed between the incident and our factual release, much erroneous speculation was generated concerning the flight, most likely due to the absence of authoritative factual information up to that point.

As we all remember, following the incident there was considerable speculation that the crew had fallen asleep during the flight. Further, shortly after our interviews with the flight crew, characterizations about what the crew told our investigators, attributed to supposedly knowledgeable sources, began circulating in the media. As a party to this and many other NTSB investigations, you must be fully aware that release of information was also consistent with our disclosure of factual information in prior accident and incident investigations.

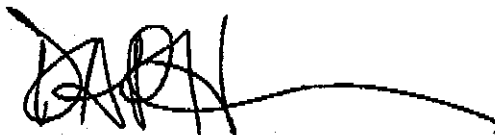
As for your second point, we do not see the connection you have drawn between the NTSB's disclosure of factual information early in the investigation and your assertion that it conflicts with voluntary safety reporting programs. The NTSB has long supported voluntary safety reporting programs, such as the Aviation Safety Action Program (ASAP) and Flight Operational Quality Assurance (FOQA) Program. As you know, we issued safety

recommendations dealing with FOQA and ASAP for 14 *Code of Federal Regulations* Part 121 carriers as a result of the Jefferson City, Missouri, accident. We have also recommended such programs for Part 135 carriers, Part 91K or fractional operations, and air medical services. These programs have produced numerous safety enhancements to air travel, and I am confident that the expansion of these programs will continue to result in a further reduction of accidents and incidents in an already safe form of transportation.

With that said, the NTSB's accident investigation process is not part of an ASAP or FOQA program and cannot be characterized as such. Our disclosure of the crew's explanation for this quite public event was appropriate under the circumstances and consistent with our investigative process. Lastly, we have operated for years under this system, whereby information received from operators and crews is made public as the investigation progresses, without significantly impairing our ability to get information from such witnesses.

In closing, I hope that you recognize that not releasing information in a timely fashion could result in the public perception that information is being withheld or that the NTSB is protecting one party at the expense of the others, or at the expense of aviation safety. To avoid that perception, we have remained consistent in our approach over the years. It reflects our continuing commitment to well-documented, open investigations that result in improving transportation safety for the traveling public. Again, thank you for your letter, and I look forward to your continued cooperation in helping us accomplish our mission.

Sincerely,



Deborah A.P. Hersman
Chairman