US to require airlines use data to prevent accidents

January 7 2015, byJoan Lowy

New U.S. government rules announced Wednesday will require airlines to collect and analyze safety data in an effort to spot troubling trends and help prevent accidents.

The Federal Aviation Administration said the causes of 123 accidents between 2001 and 2010 could have been identified beforehand if airlines had safety management systems in place.

Passenger and cargo airlines must have such systems by 2018. The rules detail the kind of data to be collected and analyzed but give airlines flexibility about gathering the information. Airlines will be required to develop programs to analyze the data.

The systems are also designed to imbue a safety consciousness throughout airline companies and establish formal methods for not only identifying hazards, but also controlling and continually assessing risks. Most U.S. airlines already safety systems, or elements of them.

"Aviation is incredibly safe, but continued growth means that we must be proactive and smart about how we use safety data to detect and mitigate risk," Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx said.

He said the safety systems give "airlines the tools they need to further reduce risk in commercial aviation."

The FAA has been under pressure for nearly a decade to develop such

rules. In 2006, the International Civil Aviation Organization, a U.N. agency without power to force action, told countries to require their airlines to adopt safety management systems and set standards.

Following the 2009 crash of a regional airliner near Buffalo, New York, Congress passed an aviation safety law that included a deadline of July 2012 for the FAA to issue rules requiring airlines to have safety management systems. The National Transportation Safety Board, which investigates air crashes, has also urged the FAA to require such systems.

Susan Bourque, who lost her sister Beverly Eckert, a noted Sept. 11 widow and activist, in the 2009 crash, praised the FAA for including regional air carriers in the rule.

"It is so important that every passenger flying on a regional airline ... receives the benefit of a commitment to and investment in best-practice, data-driven safety programs that is commensurate with that of the major carriers like Southwest and Delta—a commitment and investment that my sister Beverly and everyone else lost on Flight 3407 sadly and tragically did not receive," Bourque said in a statement.

Continental Connection Flight 3407 was operated for Continental Airlines by now-defunct regional carrier Colgan Air. All 49 people aboard the plane and a man on the ground were killed when the pilots allowed the plane to slow to a dangerously low speed, and the captain responded incorrectly to a safety warning, sending the airliner into an aerodynamic stall.

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