

# Austerity and Denial

The Foundation has been working with some regulators in Europe and we have come across a big problem that is common knowledge but that no one seems willing to address.

Regulators across the world have always had a difficult time recruiting and retaining operations inspectors. It is very difficult to find someone who is qualified for the job and who is not already flying for an airline that will pay a lot more money. If they find someone to take the job, the civil aviation authority (CAA) is lucky if these recruits stay in the government for five years, unlike typical young bureaucrats that stay for 30. The problem is that these inspectors are vital. Without them, the papers move through the bureaucracy and fees are paid, but the operators can do pretty much as they please. When there is a shortage of operations inspectors, airplanes tend to crash. It is a lesson that has been learned over and over again; the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) has the facts to prove it.

This leads us to the big secret that many people know but few are willing to discuss. Many of the major regulators in Europe are desperately short of operations inspectors, and the government budget austerity measures being taken across Europe likely will take the situation from desperate to dangerous.

To be completely clear, several major CAAs in Europe have staffing levels that would place a developing nation in Category 2 status with the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration, or even on Europe's own blacklist. This isn't clear from looking at the overall funding and staffing levels, but when this vital inspector category is examined, it is not unusual to see staffing levels of 20 to 30 percent of what is required.

The European Aviation Safety Agency conducts standardization audits that assess nations' safety oversight capabilities. The auditors know the truth.

Theoretically, this type of shortage is supposed to set off alarms at the European Commission, where action is then taken against the CAA in question. But that process was really designed to manage shaky new entrants into the community, not to be used as a tool to deal with persistent serious problems with the core membership. So the auditors report their findings, the CAA responds by drafting action plans that cannot be executed, and the situation is gracefully ignored.

So what are the safety implications? Unlike a developing country, Europe has a network of solid carriers that will continue their safety programs because it is the right thing to do. However, I do predict that these carriers will suffer economically. The rule-making apparatus of Europe is still fully intact, so the expensive paperwork will continue to flow, but the actual implementation of new rules largely will go unmonitored. Unscrupulous operators will discover they can do anything they want if the paperwork looks good. They will compromise safety any time it saves them money and use the savings to win an edge in the marketplace.

The solution is difficult, but the issue is urgent. Europe needs a comprehensive plan that doesn't just throw money at the problem. Most of these vacant positions are funded, but CAAs lack the authority to hire, and the ability to compensate. CAAs need flexibility to solve the problem. Every state will have to craft its own solution, but first somebody is going to have to acknowledge the problem and drive corrective action.



*William R. Voss  
President and CEO  
Flight Safety Foundation*

