

# Feds, Canadian pilots disagree over extent to vetting foreign pilots

The issue has come to the fore after a Sunwing pilot was found drunk in the cockpit of a plane before a flight. The Slovakian national was then taken off the plane.

BY DENIS CALNAN

The Canadian government and the group representing many Canadian pilots are in a disagreement about the extent of vetting of foreign pilots working in Canada.

While the Canadian Federal Pilots Association, which is a bargaining organization representing about 450 professional pilots, says some basic checks are not being done, the federal government says all foreign pilots are put through the hoops to meet all the licensing requirements.

The issue has come to the fore after a Sunwing pilot was found drunk in the cockpit of a plane before a flight. The Slovakian national was then taken off the plane.

Miroslav Gronych, 37, pleaded guilty to having three times the legal amount of alcohol in his blood.

Earlier this month Mr. Gronych was sentenced to eight months in prison.

Greg McConnell, national chair of the Canadian Federal Pilots Association, said there is not enough vetting by Transport Canada.

"If somebody wants to come from overseas to work in Canada and if the company for whatever reason wants to hire that individual they can choose to have Transport Canada issue them a foreign licence validation. In the staff instruction, with respect to issuing foreign licence validation, it tells the air operator to check and see if the licence and medical certificate are valid. That's generally a responsibility that's left up to the state or the country to do that vetting," he said.

"I don't believe if an air operator calls a foreign authority and asks to check on a pilot's licence that they'll be forthcoming with that information. It's different when Transport Canada makes those calls, said Mr. McConnell.

He said some of his members have expressed concern about the issue.

Mr. McConnell forwarded a document to *The Hill Times* identified as Transport Canada's staff instruction document with the subject line: "Foreign Licence Validation Certificate."

One section reads: "[Transport Canada] licensing staff are not required to request licence verification unless there are concerns over the authenticity or validity of the documents presented. It is the responsibility of the air operator to verify that each licence holder is properly qualified and holds an appropriate and valid licence and medical certificate.

The federal government said that the necessary checks are in place to ensure qualifications are valid.

"Transport Canada has regulations in place to ensure that foreign pilots operating in Canada are fully qualified," said Natasha Gauthier, manager of media relations for Transport Canada, in an email to

*The Hill Times.*

"To be employed by a Canadian air operator, foreign pilots must first obtain either a Canadian commercial or airline transport pilot license, or obtain a Canadian validation of their foreign license, also called a Foreign Licence Validation Certificate (FLVC)," reads the email.

"To obtain a Canadian commercial or airline transport pilot license, foreign pilots must meet all of the licensing requirements in Canada. These include the requirements to obtain a Canadian medical certificate, complete an application and written examinations, complete a flight test, and provide proof of flight experience," she said.

"Before issuing a FLVC, Transport Canada licensing staff verify that all foreign pilots hold a valid licence and a medical certificate issued by the same state that issued the licence," said Ms. Gauthier.

Mr. McConnell said he maintains that the proper vetting is not done.

Mr. McConnell said he does not know when the proper vetting practice stopped, and said that when he was a licensing inspector at Transport Canada he did the vetting that he said it now no longer does. He said he does not know why it would have been cut, but that he imagines it could be due to budget cuts at some point.

"Canadians need to have confidence that carriers are operating safely, and Transport Canada inspectors play a critical role in providing the public with the assurance that the system is safe," said Conservative Transport Critic Kelly Block (Carlton Trail-Eagle Creek, Sask.), her party's transport critic, in an email to *The Hill Times*.

"Transport Canada has a responsibility to ensure that all carriers are meeting all relevant Canadian regulations, including those pertaining to crew training," she said.

"The NDP has been successful in pushing a study on aviation safety in the Transport Committee," said NDP transport critic Robert Aubin (Trois-Rivières, Que.) in an email.

"We find it unacceptable that Transport Canada instructs its personnel to not verify the validity of foreign pilots piloting licence. Since November 2015, [Transport Minister] Marc Garneau has done nothing to correct these serious air safety deficiencies, which put Canadians the safety of Canadians at risk," he said.

In an opinion piece for *The Financial Post*, Ashley Nunes, with the Center for Transportation Logistics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, said the Canadian Federal Pilots Association is wrong for thinking the government is better than companies at validation.

He said that "airlines have more incentive than the government does to vet pilots, regardless of where those pilots are from. Airplanes—like the one Gronych commanded—can cost upwards of \$100-million. What airline would knowingly hire a pilot that compromises that investment, let alone the lives of customers? The answer is none."

Mr. Nunes wrote in the *Financial Post* that unions speak about passenger safety, but "pilot unions have long supported contradictory positions. Drug testing and psychological testing—important safeguards in the aviation industry—have all been opposed by pilot unions."

*The Hill Times*



Canada's federal Transport Minister Marc Garneau, pictured in this file photo on Parliament Hill. *The Hill Times* photograph by Jake Wright



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