



CFPA-APFC

Canadian Federal Pilots Association
Association des Pilotes Fédéraux du Canada

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Aviation inspectors warn of impending disaster

Ottawa – A new Abacus Data study among Transport Canada’s frontline aviation inspectors reveals broad concern about recent cuts to aviation safety oversight and an ominous sense that a major aviation accident in Canada is likely in the near future.

The survey finds most Transport Canada’s pilot inspectors haven’t flown an actual aircraft in years and a majority report they have not been trained for the work they are asked to do.

The state of aviation safety in Canada today has left eight-in-ten (81%) inspectors surveyed predicting a major aviation accident in the near future, according to the survey.

“The House of Commons Transport Committee, which begins a study of aviation safety tomorrow, should pay close attention to this report. The opinions of this expert group show that Transport Canada’s aviation safety oversight has gone terribly wrong,” said Captain Greg McConnell, National Chair of the Canadian Federal Pilots Association which commissioned the survey.

Among the issues in play for inspectors is Transport Canada’s Safety Management Systems (SMS) which transfers responsibility for setting acceptable levels of risk and monitoring safety performance to the airlines themselves.

Because SMS imposes a heavy administrative burden, inspectors are now largely office-bound spending more time reviewing paperwork than inspecting aircraft, and they conduct SMS surveillance of airlines less frequently than ever before.

Annual inspections have given way to SMS reviews that can happen as infrequently as every five years or more. Even at this pace, Transport Canada’s inspectors can’t keep up; according to internal documents Transport Canada has completed only 50% of its planned SMS assessments in 2016/17.

In these circumstances Abacus found a wide majority (81%) see Transport Canada’s SMS as a barrier that prevents them from identifying and fixing safety problems before they become accidents or incidents. Three-in-four (73%) believe SMS has exposed the public to elevated risk.

“Gone are the days of unannounced in-person inspections or even regular inspections thanks to Transport Canada’s singular mission to audit companies’ SMS paperwork. For many operators, we simply cannot verify they are functioning safely because we really can’t look at their operations. We just don’t know,” McConnell said

Transport Canada’s singular reliance on SMS is at odds with international safety requirements. The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) requires countries like Canada to maintain a program of oversight that includes traditional audits, inspections and enforcement in conjunction with SMS.

Instead of following this requirement Canada has been cutting back its oversight program whole sectors at a time. For example, business aircraft have been removed from Transport Canada’s oversight program as of August 2016. Urban heliports such as those atop of many big city hospitals will no longer be subject to scheduled inspections. And, all airports will no longer be subject to full safety assessments. Instead, a Transport Canada inspection will now cover only one small part of an airport’s safety plan. By comparison, the US Federal Aviation Administration requires full inspections of airports annually.

These decisions have been taken with little consultation and without notice to MPs, Parliament or the general public.

Eight-in-ten (82%) Transport Canada aviation inspectors regard these cuts to the safety oversight program as decisions that will increase the risk of an accident, according to the Abacus study.

In addition to cutting its oversight program, Transport Canada has allowed the skills and qualifications of its inspectorate to dwindle to dangerously low levels.

<i>How many years have elapsed since the last time you were assigned to a Professional Aviation Currency Program involving aircraft flight time?</i>	
1-3 years	41%
4-6 years	18%
7-10+ years	8%

Abacus found that many licenced pilot inspectors have flown actual aircraft so infrequently their licences have become or are near to becoming invalid. Pilot inspectors have largely been grounded after Transport Canada cut the Civil Aviation Flying Program budget by 60% from 2008 to today.

When it comes to skills and qualifications, 70% of respondents reported that they sometimes (43%) or frequently (27%) were assigned tasks for which they were not trained.

“We have inspectors assigned to oversee helicopter companies who would not know how to fly a helicopter if their life depended on it,” said McConnell said.

Licensed pilots who work for Transport Canada and the Transportation Safety Board as aviation inspectors/investigators and who are members of the Canadian Federal Pilots Association (CFPA), were surveyed for the study. The survey was conducted from March 14th to 22nd, 2017, using an internet questionnaire programmed and collected by Abacus Data. A total of 243 CFPA members completed the survey representing a response rate of 64%. Based on the response rate and the sample composition, the results of the survey should be considered representative of the opinions of aviation inspectors who are members of the CFPA.

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