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04 December 2009

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PILOT FLIGHT TIME RULES – A SAFETY ISSUE OR ONE FOR THE SOCIAL AGENDA?

The Association of European Airlines, representing Europe's most important network carriers, has publicly questioned the process taking place to review rules on pilots' flight and duty time. An essentially bureaucratic process to review and coordinate national rules has been transformed into a heated debate in which social parameters are set against allegations of unsafe practices.

At the centre of the debate is the European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA), and a consultancy report submitted to it under its mandate from the European Commission. The Moebus report, which argues for significant reductions in pilot working hours and increases in off-duty time had been severely criticised by AEA as lacking both in scientific and medical validity and in objectivity.

Said AEA Secretary General Ulrich Schulte-Strathaus: *"Clearly, shorter working hours and more time off duty means a need for more pilots to do the same amount of work. Such an outcome would be vigorously promoted by the unions, just as it would be resisted by the airlines. This is in the nature of industrial-relations negotiation, and EASA should realise that this is what is happening here; its remit is safety, not social affairs"*.

The current network of national schemes, coordinated within a European framework that incorporates some flexibility, is demonstrably safe; the pilots' campaign has had to look outside Europe for specific case studies to support its arguments. Indeed, some of the recommendations of the Moebus Report would disqualify, on safety grounds, some operations by European airlines on major air routes which have operated routinely and without incident, day after day, for many years. Meanwhile, their non-European competitors would continue to operate such routes, day after day, without incident.

“Safety is not a competitive issue”, said Ulrich Schulte-Strathaus. *“We have rules, and the airlines abide by them. Those rules were drafted by experts who were satisfied that they were safe, and so they have proved; we find no compelling arguments that they have failed to deliver”.*

AEA insists that any review of current practices should focus squarely on safety issues and rely on the input of experts with first-hand knowledge of airline operational procedures. *“A forum conducted under the protocols of collective bargaining has no place in the safety debate and EASA must resist attempts for its clear safety mandate to be manipulated to conform to a social agenda”*, said the AEA Secretary General.

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Note to the Editor: The Association of European Airlines (AEA) brings together 33 European established scheduled network carriers. These collectively carry 366 million passengers and 7 million tonnes of cargo each year, operating 2,617 aircraft serving 662 destinations in 162 countries with 11,585 flights a day. They provide around 394,200 jobs directly, and generate a total turnover of €79 billion

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