

Proposals toughen airline safety rules included in FAA Reauthorization Bill

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Washington, D.C. – U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar secured two amendments to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Reauthorization bill that passed the Senate Commerce Committee today. The first amendment will improve airline safety by enhancing transparency and accountability in the FAA’s safety review process. Klobuchar’s second provision will provide additional oversight to the Air Traffic Control Modernization Board that will oversee the FAA’s transition to NextGen – 21st century technology to increase efficiency in tracking flights and improving safety for consumers.

Last year, Klobuchar participated in a hearing that disclosed a pattern of breakdowns of what has been a voluntary safety reporting system between the airlines and the FAA. At the hearing, FAA inspectors disclosed that Southwest Airlines had continued flying airplanes even though critical safety checks involving cracks in aircraft fuselages had not been performed on approximately 50 jets and American Airlines cancelled nearly 2,000 flights in order to catch up on inspections of aircraft wiring – inspections that should have been performed previously under its agreement with the FAA.

“We have seen evidence of a revolving door between the FAA and the airlines, and of airlines gaming the system to learn when their inspections will occur,” Klobuchar said. “We need to be clear: It is the American public that is the customer of the FAA, and not the airlines. These amendments will strengthen airline safety and hold anyone who tries to undermine the safety process accountable.”

The language included in the FAA Reauthorization Bill includes many provisions of a bill drafted by Senators Klobuchar (D-MN) and Olympia Snowe (R-ME) earlier this year that will:

- Establish a whistleblower office in the FAA;
- Establish a cooling-off period for FAA inspectors before they can work for airlines and interact with FAA;
- Establish a roving “National Review Board” that will travel around to various FAA inspection offices to conduct safety reviews/audits; and
- Require Review Board inspections of maintenance facilities be periodic and random.

The Klobuchar amendment will strengthen the original language by requiring that Review Board inspections also be unannounced so that airlines can’t game the system. It would also prohibit any member of the National Review Team from participating in an audit if that member had previously had the responsibility for inspecting or overseeing the inspection of the operations of that air carrier.

The bill moves to the full Senate for consideration.