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Fatigue Mitigation for Flights Affected by COVID-19 Restrictions

MAINTAINING SAFETY STANDARDS

Aviation is a complex system that relies on many facets working together to achieve a quality safety outcome. IFALPA has become concerned that the COVID-19 pandemic is putting pressure on some operators and crew to neglect or suspend some aspects of aviation safety, such as the standards for crew fatigue management. It is clear that this is not being done on purpose to undermine the standards of safety we have in place. Rather, operators and crews may be prioritizing productivity and, as a result, inadvertently allowing safety priorities to become secondary.

As the aviation industry adapts to the restrictions put in place to combat COVID-19, the regular fatigue measures for flights are being pushed to their limits more than normal. In particular, repatriation flights can be longer than usual and may involve limited or no opportunities for rest at destination ports. For cargo operations, pilots continuously face such restrictions.

The current operating environment is challenging and the typical safety defences that are in place may not be functioning as well as they normally would. The protection of safety now relies more heavily upon adherence to the already-established processes and standards of the safety systems than during normal operational climates.

National regulations must be followed at the planning stage, as well as ensuring that planned FDPs are monitored in actual operations for any unforeseen circumstances.

The IFALPA HUPER Fatigue Management Working Group has provided some initial recommendations for operators and crews to consider whilst managing the risks of fatigue during these operations.

CREW MEMBERS

Flight Preparation

- Crew members are often under significant levels of stress, uncertainty, and distraction due to the current situation. There is worry over possible job loss resulting from business downsizing and restructuring and general concern due to the spread of COVID-19. As a result, they may not be sleeping well. It is therefore important that crew members carefully consider: o Their mental and physical fitness to undertake or continue any duty for which they have been assigned. o If they are allowing thoughts of job loss and financial pressure to alter or interfere with their regular operational decision-making.
- Crews should be as rested as possible before the start of their duty. Sleeping on the aircraft does not provide the same quality as sleeping in a hotel room where light, temperature, and noise can be managed.

Pilots who are experiencing increased stress can consider reaching out to their Pilot Assistance / Peer Support program for assistance, where such a program is established.

Onboard Fatigue Mitigations

- The crew should communicate with each other to ensure the most alert crew members perform the take-off(s) and landing(s). This may mean it is safer that different crew member(s) conduct the landing compared to the crew who conducted the take-off.
- Inflight rest should aim to maximize onboard sleep during the circadian night with priority for in-flight rest being afforded to the landing crew.
- Crews are encouraged to apply appropriate in-flight fatigue countermeasures, considering their operational experiences in similar flight schedules.
- Crews are encouraged to perform controlled rest whenever allowed by the state regulations and operationally suitable to do so. Remember, this is a tactical mitigation for higher-than-expected fatigue and should not be planned for.

Fatigue Reporting

- All crew are encouraged to write fatigue reports on planned and/or executed flights whenever fatigue issues are considered relevant.

OPERATORS

Planning Operations

- Operations conducted under “special circumstances” need additional risk assessment and mitigation. This includes both health and safety aspects in pandemic cases to operate under special circumstances to maintain an acceptable level of safety.
- Consider the use of augmented crewing in situations not normally requiring it, and avoid scheduling take-off, and especially landing, during the WOCL.
- Avoid rostering maximum permissible FDP with minimum rest followed by maximum duty, especially if these duty periods overlap the WOCL.
- Predictive modelling, where available, may provide an indication of any significant potential problem area in the revised schedules and pairings. With a reduction in current flying density, alternate slot allocation requests are unlikely to be rejected. Operators should aim to prioritise the planning of flights to the most favourable times for crew fatigue mitigation.

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- Particular attention should be paid to the return leg. Crew for the return leg should be afforded the opportunity of adequate rest before the outbound leg.
- The turnaround time may be longer than planned, so consideration should be given to this possibility in terms of prolonged wakefulness.
- Where possible, the use of crew who have minimal commute times from home / place of rest to place of reporting for duty, should be the preferred rostering option. Alternatively, provision of suitable hotel accommodation should be made.
- If the route is not familiar for the crew (e.g. it is outside normal company operations), then operators should assign crew members with a high level of operational experience to conduct the flight(s) and provide adequate prefamiliarisation material and briefings to the operating crew.

Crew Fitness for Duty

- Crew should have the possibility to delay the departure if they have been awake for an extended period prior to a wake-up call (as in normal operational environments).

Crew Augmentation

- Operate with augmented crews, especially if the flights are to start before their WOCL and are completed after the WOCL. Augmented crewing, especially double crewing (2 captains and 2 first officers), also provides some additional mitigating measures if a crew member were to exhibit COVID 19 symptoms during the flight(s).

Onboard Sleep Getting as much sleep as possible during scheduled in-flight rest periods is important. Therefore, rest on board should be segregated from passengers and make use of the most optimal crew rest facilities available to have the best chance of adequate rest.

CONCLUSION

During these times of high pressure and stress for the industry and crews, IFALPA believes that it is of increased importance to maintain vigilance and an adherence to established safety standards. The new risks introduced in operations affected by COVID- 19 restrictions should be considered together with all the underpinning operational risks. Outcomes from these risk assessments should be in addition to, not instead of, an adherence to established safety standards.

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