

FAA works for safer skies

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FROM THE COCKPIT

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The Federal Aviation Administration operates the largest and most complex aviation system in the world and controls almost half the world's air traffic. More than 120 domestic and 90 international air carriers serve the United States daily.

Headed by Marion Clifton Blakey, former chairwoman of the National Transportation Safety Board, the FAA lists safety as the "single most important commitment we can make to help revive an economically troubled industry." The agency acknowledges that "if passengers do not feel safe - if they do not have confidence in the system - they will not fly."

But is it the FAA's job to assure safety? And what is "safety"? In her book "Flying Blind, Flying Safe" (Avon Books, \$20), Mary Schiavo, former Department of Transportation inspector general, writes: "Safety is not defined in the Federal Aviation Act of 1958. It is not specified in the FAA regulations. It is not explained in the agency's guidelines. Thus, aviation safety is subjective. Deciding that safety is at risk, or should be improved, is an informal, fluid quest, one that FAA officials determine on a case-by-case basis."

Congress eliminated the FAA's conflicting dual mandate to both promote and regulate commercial aviation in 1996, after the crash of ValuJet Flight 592. After the tragic events of Sept. 11, the FAA's security functions were shifted to the new Transportation Security Administration.

I asked the following question of Blakey:

Q. What are your top three safety priorities for the FAA for the coming year?

A. If it could cause an accident, it is a priority. We literally leave no stone unturned. Over the years, we've been very successful at eliminating the causes of most accidents. Now, we're able to focus on a much narrower subset of causal factors. Without question, American aviation is the world's safest form of transportation, because we have "best in class" pilots, mechanics, technicians, controllers and inspectors. Combine them and you have a front line that simply will not allow accidents to happen on their watch.

The FAA is focusing specifically on reducing the overall accident rate for commercial airliners. This is a responsibility we share with the airlines. We're working together to identify individual problems and events before they become trends. That's how you break the chain that triggers an accident. Of equal importance is our goal to reduce fatal accidents in smaller, private aircraft. The strategy is simple: We're putting technology in place to help private pilots operate as safely as possible. Part of this is improving flight training - without increasing its cost. We've placed a special emphasis on Alaska, which depends on private pilots more than (does) any of the lower 48. We're expanding and accelerating safety and navigation improvements there. We're even increasing the use of weather cameras in high mountain passes and difficult canyons to help pilots navigate

Nationwide, we're also working to reduce runway incursions. We've been providing extra training to pilots and controllers to raise runway awareness. We've also installed advanced radar at 35 major airports to alert controllers to unauthorized surface movements, which adds an extra layer of safety. Our efforts are outlined in the FAA's Flight Plan, a five-year strategy to get the passenger from point to point safely, efficiently and on time.