

**FACILITATION (FAL) DIVISION — TWELFTH SESSION****Cairo, Egypt, 22 March to 2 April 2004****Agenda Item 6: International Health Regulations (IHRs)****AIRCRAFT AIR QUALITY**

(Presented by the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF))

**SUMMARY**

This paper raises health concerns regarding four aspects of aircraft air quality. It addresses the problems of inadequate ventilation, reduced oxygen supply, contaminated air supply and pesticide exposure. In each case solutions are proposed.

Action by the Division is in paragraph 2.1.

**1. BACKGROUND**

1.1 The ITF regularly receives reports from its affiliate members and from passengers of symptoms associated with substandard aircraft air quality, ranging from general malaise to tunnel vision, fainting, and memory loss. The near-absence of effective regulations to govern the design, operation, and maintenance of air supply systems on aircraft, and the absence of a standardized air quality incident reporting system, have made it difficult to identify and correct aircraft air quality problems. As a result, many crew members are resigned to experience symptoms associated with the poor quality air in their workplace. This can compromise both operational safety and the health of crew members and passengers. Four general problems with aircraft air quality, each with proposed solutions, are described below.

1.2 *Inadequate ventilation.* Ventilation is a key component of good air quality. Maintaining a minimum flow of outside air into an indoor space ("ventilation rate") has been shown to control contaminant levels and limit reports of symptoms such as headache, fatigue, nausea, and general malaise, as well as the airborne spread of infectious disease. Because any increase in ventilation rate conflicts with the commercial incentive to control fuel costs, the amount of outside air provided to each person on an aircraft is typically less than half that provided in many other work environments, which contributes to substandard air quality. The assertion that recirculated air passed through a HEPA filter is equivalent to outside air is incorrect. The only effective solution is to endorse the increase the supply of outside air to a more acceptable level such as 7.5 litres per second per person of outside air. A recent analysis concluded that this would cost approximately 0.10 Euro per hour per passenger. If systems on the current fleet cannot meet this standard, then they must be operated at their maximum flow rate. Additionally, the system's ductwork must be kept clean.

1.3 *Reduced oxygen supply.* The amount of available oxygen in the aircraft air during flight essentially depends on how high the aircraft is flying – flying at higher altitudes means less oxygen, all other things being equal. Aircraft must be designed to provide an effective altitude in the cabin ("cabin altitude") no higher than 8000 feet (2440 metres) when the aircraft is flying at its maximum altitude. At this altitude, the supply of available oxygen is reduced by as much as 25 per cent relative to what is available at sea level. There is no minimum operating standard for cabin altitude, but many aircraft are operated at or below their maximum certified flight altitude, such that cabin altitude should be equal to or less than 8000 feet. If, however, an aircraft is operated above its maximum certified flight altitude, then cabin altitude can exceed 8000 feet. External air leakage through door seals, and operating with cabin ventilation systems on low-flow as a fuel-savings measure, can cause cabin altitude to increase. The 8000 feet design standard was first introduced in 1957, based on studies of the oxygen needs of fit, young military pilots. The standard has not since been updated and there is a longstanding debate over whether the reduced oxygen supply associated with even the 8000 feet design standard is adequate for physically active cabin crew who require more oxygen than sedentary pilots and passengers. Additionally, if a person is medically compromised such as through heart or lung disease, is overweight, very old or very young, unfit, or taking certain medications, then their body will use the reduced amount of oxygen at altitude less efficiently than a fit pilot. Given the current demographics of an aging population, and the prevalence of obesity, smoking, asthma, and heart disease, the reduced oxygen supply at 8000 feet is clearly cause for concern. In this regard, we support the "precautionary principle" and consider a maximum 6000 feet (1830 metres) operating standard to be more appropriate to meet the oxygen needs of the general public and active cabin crew, in accordance with current research and medical opinion.

1.4 *Contaminated air supply.* As a result of deficiencies in system maintenance, operation, and design, the air supplied to the cabin and flight deck can be contaminated with various compounds, including hydraulic fluids and oils. When heated, these contaminants are a potential source of carbon monoxide, a gas that reduces the amount of oxygen delivered to the body's cells. This is especially serious at altitude where the supply of oxygen is already reduced. In addition, some commercial engine oils and hydraulic fluids contain a neurotoxic anti-wear agent that can contaminate the aircraft air supply. Over the years, cabin crew, pilots, and passengers around the world have infrequently but persistently reported symptoms consistent with exposure to carbon monoxide and/or neurotoxic agents. In more serious cases, contaminated flight deck air has been the prime suspect in some crashes and near-crashes. It is critical that affected crew members and passengers have access to specific airline maintenance records that indicate the type and extent of air supply contamination, and that regulators require airlines to continuously monitor carbon monoxide, at a minimum, in-flight. The airlines must take responsibility for related illness and work with the manufacturers to keep the air supply systems clean.

1.5 *Pesticide exposure.* According to FAL/12-IP/6, some sixty countries continue to require that incoming aircraft are sprayed with pesticides in order to kill insects that may be on board. This process is called "aircraft disinsection." The pesticides are applied in the occupied or soon-to-be occupied cabin. Crew members that fly to these countries are exposed to these pesticides on a regular basis. The degree of exposure can be considerable because every surface in the cabin and cockpit must be sprayed, but the aircraft is not always left to dry properly before crew members board. The exposure potential in the passenger cabin has recently been highlighted as cause for concern (CADHS, 2003). Crew member unions have received hundreds of related reports of illness, including difficulty breathing and severe irritation of the eyes, skin, and throat. In some cases, immune system dysfunction and neurological problems have been reported. Mechanical alternatives to chemical treatment of aircraft, such as a wall of forced air across open doors to repel insects are being tested and, once finalized, should be accepted as an alternative means of compliance in the spirit of related ICAO standards and the WHO International Health Regulations. These issues are dealt with in more detail in a separate working paper by the ITF.

## 2. ACTION BY THE DIVISION

2.1 The Division is invited to adopt the following B-type Recommendations:-

### **Recommendation B/X —**

ICAO is invited to develop, in collaboration with stakeholders, standards and recommended practices and guidance material designed to ensure minimum acceptable standards of aircraft air quality both in regard to operational safety, occupational and health protection and passenger comfort.

### **Recommendation B/XX —**

In developing such material, ICAO is asked to give consideration to the following elements:

- 1) a minimum ventilation requirement that is consistent with that shown effective at controlling occupants' symptoms in ground-based environments (e.g., 7.5 l/s per person);
- 2) a review of research to properly assess and document the oxygen needs of active cabin crew and a cross-section of typical passengers;
- 3) endorsement of requisite and prompt access to relevant aircraft mechanical records following a documented air quality incident;
- 4) endorsement of requisite continuous monitoring of carbon monoxide in the cabin and cockpit air supply systems on commercial aircraft;
- 5) specific measures to improve aircraft air supply system design, operation, and maintenance, intended to reduce the frequency and severity of air supply contamination;
- 6) endorsement of effective mechanical means of disinsection in the occupied areas of commercial aircraft as an acceptable alternative to pesticide spraying;
- 7) guidance material specific to the application of pesticides in the occupied areas of commercial aircraft to minimize overexposure; and
- 8) a standardized reporting system for all types of aircraft air quality incidents.

— END —