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TECHNICAL COMMISSION

Agenda Item 25: Other issues to be considered by the Technical Commission

IN SUPPORT OF STREAMLINING GROUND HANDLING SAFETY OVERSIGHT

(Presented by Aviation Services Association - ASA World)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ground handling is essential to aviation safety, yet oversight remains fragmented and dominated by overlapping audits by aircraft operators. As traffic grows, turnarounds tighten, and staffing constraints persist, this legacy model disperses safety effort and imposes heavy, duplicative burdens on independent ground handling organizations (GHOs). Evidence indicates GHOs can spend up to 178 audit-days per year, with roughly four fifths of audit items repeating material already assessed; in a 100-station sample, GHOs faced an average of 6.25 audits per station annually, consuming about 50 staff-hours per station. With pending ICAO SARPs amendments on ground handling, and with moves toward oversight frameworks that include mandatory safety management systems (SMS) and systematic auditing, a centralized framework that places safety audits under the exclusive responsibility of competent authorities and enables mutual recognition would streamline safety oversight. By consolidating audits to reduce duplication—while maintaining accountability through harmonized SMS requirements, minimum training standards, and risk-based oversight frequencies—States can improve safety performance, refocus resources on higher-risk areas, and strengthen the operational and financial resilience of GHOs.

<i>Strategic Goals:</i>	This information paper relates to Strategic Goals: <i>Every Flight is Safe and Secure</i> ; and <i>No Country Left Behind</i> .
<i>Financial implications:</i>	No
<i>References:</i>	<i>EU Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2025/20 amending Regulation (EU) No 965/2012</i> <i>IATA Airport Handling Manual (AHM)</i> <i>IATA Cargo Handling Manual (ICHM)</i> <i>IATA Ground Operations Manual (IGOM)</i> <i>ICAO Amendment 18 to the International Standards and Recommended Practices, Annex 14 — Aerodromes, Volume I — Aerodrome Design and Operations</i> <i>Doc 10121, ICAO Manual on Ground Handling</i> <i>ICAO Strategic Goals</i>

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Ground handling operations are integral to aviation safety, encompassing passenger, aircraft and baggage handling, ramp and cargo operations, and other essential aviation activities that directly interface with the operations of aerodrome and aircraft operators.

1.2 Worldwide traffic growth, increasing airspace and aerodrome congestion, shorter aircraft turnarounds and staff shortages are creating unprecedented operational complexity and contributing to rising ground handling incidents. This escalating risk environment underscores the urgent need for harmonized regulations including a standardized safety oversight framework.

1.3 Yet while ground and cargo handling is today largely provided by independent GHOs, oversight remains anchored in legacy practices that do not fully address the sector's complexity and safety risks.

1.4 Several States are advancing oversight of ground handling organizations (GHOs). Authorities in Australia, Kenya, Malaysia, India, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates conduct mandatory safety audits, while others—including the United Kingdom—are developing or refining oversight frameworks. This momentum offers an opportunity for authorities, industry, and GHOs to share good practices and align approaches, signalling growing recognition of the need for formal regulatory supervision.

2. SAFETY OVERSIGHT BURDENS OF A NON-REGULATED REGIME

2.1 Analysis by the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) concluded that oversight of ground handling activities and GHOs is not harmonized across EASA Member States. Safety management systems (SMS) are not mandated; adoption is voluntary, and a common safety baseline is not assured. Minimum training requirements for ground handling personnel are likewise not standardized, except where organizations apply industry standards.

2.2 EASA also highlighted the inefficiencies of the current safety oversight regime. It noted that while aircraft and aerodrome operators perform audits and inspections of GHOs, those audits are inefficient and result in a huge burden on GHOs. It cited some extreme but not singular cases of large GHOs spending 178 days a year in audits, whose results are 80 per cent identical with each other and not able to show any new safety items that the GHO is not already aware of via its internal audits. Also, in a sample of 100 stations, EASA found that any GHO is subject to 6.25 audits per year per station resulting in a non-productive time requirement of around 50 staff-hours per station.

2.3 While the IATA Safety Audit for Ground Operations (ISAGO), introduced in 2008, was intended to streamline oversight by eliminating multiple aircraft operator audits—similar to the impact of IOSA between aircraft operators—in practice it has not achieved this goal. Aircraft operator audits have continued to increase, and GHOs have raised concerns that the recent dilution of ISAGO, including reduced on-site verification, narrower operational scope, and greater reliance on self-assessment, may risk further proliferation of duplicative audits rather than their reduction.

2.4 GHOs also voice concerns that some aircraft operators use safety audits as a tool to leverage their bargaining power and impose onerous terms, such as extended payment periods, reduced liability caps, limited price escalation clauses, and restrictive termination clauses. Such practices directly

weaken the financial viability and economic resilience of GHOs, ultimately constraining their capacity to invest in safety-critical infrastructure, training, and technology.

3. REFORMING SAFETY OVERSIGHT

3.1 ASA World commends ICAO for its groundbreaking initiative to develop dedicated ground handling Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs), which represents a historic milestone for safety enhancement, establishing global consistency in oversight and significantly contributing towards improving operational resilience across Member States.

3.2 ASA World also commends the European Union Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) for recently adopting regulations that require competent authority oversight over GHOs, including systematic auditing and mandatory GHO safety management systems. The EASA model offers valuable insights for ICAO SARPs and demonstrates a regional effort to address fragmented oversight.

3.3 Brazil's working paper at the 41st Assembly introduced the Certification of Ramp Equipment and Services (CRES), a voluntary certification framework developed by the national association of Brazilian GHOs (ABESATA) utilizing an independent validator certified by ANAC, the competent authority. Launched in June 2022, CRES represents proactive GHO industry leadership and commitment to structured safety improvements, combining regulatory, financial, operational, personnel, and environmental governance dimensions in a comprehensive certification approach.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1 Aviation faces unprecedented operational pressure: worldwide traffic growth, increasing congestion, tightening turnarounds, and persistent staff shortages. Current ground handling oversight regimes, designed for a simpler era, cannot meet these escalating demands.

4.2 ASA World welcomes ICAO's leadership in developing harmonized SARPs for ground handling and supports continued collaboration among ICAO, States, regional organizations, and industry.

4.3 ASA World embraces efforts to adopt harmonized ground handling regulations, including mandatory safety management systems for GHOs, in addition to streamlining safety oversight by placing safety audits under the exclusive authority of competent authorities.

4.4 ASA World stands ready to support the implementation of comprehensive safety oversight frameworks that enhance operational safety while eliminating the inefficiencies and duplicative burdens of the current fragmented system.

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