

THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Many Canadian runways still too short: safety board

Federal body blasts government inaction, claims Ottawa only consulted aviation industry on runway extension

Daniel Leblanc

Ottawa — From Wednesday's Globe and Mail Published on Tuesday, Mar. 16, 2010 12:00PM EDT Last updated on Tuesday, Mar. 16, 2010 9:02PM EDT

Major runways at Canadian airports are still too short – increasing the risk of planes overshooting the runway like the Air France jet that crashed and burned five years ago at Toronto's Pearson International Airport, the Transportation Safety Board is warning.

In a blast against government inaction, the independent federal body said [its recommendation](#) for the creation of 300-metre safety areas at the end of major runways has been ignored by Ottawa and the country's big airports.

Even worse, the board said, the government is only consulting the aviation industry on the addition of a 150-metre safety area, or half of the length determined to be necessary after the 2005 Air France crash in Toronto.

In an interview, Transportation Safety Board chair Wendy Tadros said the process is “taking too long” seeing as how planes that overshoot runways represent one of the biggest problems facing the aviation industry.

“Somewhere in the world, about once a month, a large aircraft will run off the end of a runway in bad weather. It's a persistent problem,” Ms. Tadros said.

She said that while Canadian airports remain relatively safe, U.S. airports are moving more quickly to add the buffer zones. “In the United States, they are moving toward the recommended practice from the ICAO [International Civil Aviation Organization] of 300 metres,” she said.

Asked whether the high cost of the additional safety areas is causing the delays, Ms. Tadros refused to answer. “For us, it's an issue of safety,” she said.

The TSB made its recommendation for a 300-metre safety zone (or an equivalent “arrestor bed” – crushable concrete that can stop an aircraft – where there is not enough space) after a two-year probe into an Air France flight that overshot the runway at Pearson during a torrential rainstorm. None of the 309 people on board died in the crash, but pictures of the plane in flames left no doubt as to the extent of the potential catastrophe that had been avoided.

The Harper government announced consultations on the matter in early 2008, but it has yet to take action. As it stands, the government is in discussions with the aviation community through a joint government-industry body called the Canadian Aviation Regulation Advisory Council.

Captain Barry Wiszniowski, chair of the Air Canada Pilots Association's safety division, said the lessons from the Air France crash have not been applied, at Pearson or elsewhere.

“Nothing's changed,” he said in an interview.

Liberal MP Joe Volpe said the government is to blame for the inaction, adding that Conservative ministers

“agree with everything then don't do anything about it.”

But Transport Minister John Baird defended Ottawa's handling of the file, saying there is “more work to be done.”

“Our airports meet currently all the international standards,” Mr. Baird told reporters. “Some of these changes don't happen overnight but, like I say, we welcome the work [of the TSB].”

The Greater Toronto Airports Authority said that it meets all federal standards and will comply if any changes are mandated. GTAA spokesman Scott Armstrong added that safety trumps costs when it comes to runways.

“If there is something that needs to be done, we will look to do it cost-effectively. But cost certainly isn't a deciding factor when it comes to a safety concern,” he said.

The TSB added that despite its recent recommendations, airline pilots still often lack the necessary information about landing conditions during bad weather, including the presence of ice, snow or slush on runways.

“Our investigations show the information available may not always be current, and current information may not have been transmitted to the pilots in a timely basis,” said TSB board member Kathy Fox.

The TSB's comments on airline safety came as part of a “watch list” of nine transportation problems facing Canadians, including the lack of emergency preparations on ferries and dangerous railway crossings.

“We know from hard experience, if persistent problems are not addressed, there will be another accident,” Ms. Tadros said.

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