

Leisure Air problems 'systemic,' FAA says

■ Airline must address problems in crew training, maintenance, recordkeeping

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Leisure Air's flights remained suspended yesterday as government regulators said that the charter airline has "systemic problems" with its operations.

Federal Aviation Administration officials said that the airline needs to correct problems in crew training, aircraft maintenance and recordkeeping before it can fly passengers again.

Friday night, Leisure Air suspended all flights after a weeklong FAA safety inspection that included a review of the airline's dispatch center at Smith Reynolds Airport in Winston-Salem.

It is the first time in seven years that an airline has ceased flying because the FAA thought that the airline was unsafe.

Yesterday, the airline received FAA approval to conduct training flights and said it hoped to resume full operations "very soon."

In a news release, Harold J. "Hap" Pareti, the company's chief executive, described the FAA action as "only a temporary setback" and said that Leisure Air would address the agency's concerns.

Because the airline's flights are suspended, the FAA will not allow Leisure Air to move operations from Winston-Salem to McLean, Va., as the airline had planned.

Robert Young, the company's president, said yesterday that the move, which affects 25 to 30 area jobs, will be postponed for two months.

DESPITE THE suspension, Leisure Air appears to have the backing of its major customers — tour companies that set up vacations to such places as the Caribbean, Mexico and Hawaii.

Ronald Fayne, a vice president at Hamilton Miller Hudson & Fayne, a charter tour company in Detroit that buys seats on Leisure Air's planes for vacation packages, said yesterday that his company would continue booking flights with the airline.

"We have every confidence they are going to work out the situation," Fayne said. "They have excellent planes and their service has been very good. We're confident everything is under control."

Charter Flight Suspensions

1983 — Air Illinois

An FAA investigation led to partial suspension of Air Illinois' operations after 10 people died when a commuter plane crashed in Pickneyville, Ill.

1986 — Arrow Air

256 U.S. soldiers were killed when a DC-8 crashed in Gandor, Newfoundland. Arrow Air's operations were suspended after an FAA investigation. The U.S. military stepped up its own inspections of charter airlines.

1988 — Ryan Air Service

The FAA suspended all of Ryan Air Service's flights after an investigation into a commuter-plane crash in Homer, Alaska, in November 1987. Eighteen people were killed in the crash. Ryan's senior management was replaced, and safety- and crew-training changes were made.

1994 — Leisure Air

Leisure Air suspended all of its flights after the FAA found safety violations during an inspection related to a planned move from Winston-Salem to McLean, Va.

Source: Federal Aviation Administration

Leisure Air said it would take delivery of two new Airbus A320 airplanes and mothball its Boeing 757 and two McDonnell Douglas DC-10s next week.

THE AIRLINE SAID that most of the violations alleged by the FAA center on recordkeeping for the DC-10s and 757. It already has five A320s.

Since Friday, most Leisure Air passengers have been picked up by other airlines. Fayne said that only a few passengers have canceled vacations or registered complaints since Friday. Leisure Air had seven to eight flights a day with 1,000 to 1,200 passengers.

Leo Janssens, the president of the Aviation Safety Institute — a nonprofit industry think tank in Worthington, Ohio, that is often critical of FAA practices — said that he's glad to see an FAA inspection had led to a suspension.

"Charter airlines generally operate under more relaxed safety regulations than commercial carriers," Janssens said. "That's not to say

charters are unsafe. But they are generally not doing the kind of self-policing that's really necessary."

Three times during the 1980s, charter airlines were forced by the FAA to suspend operations or they voluntarily canceled flights, said Arlene Salac, a spokesman for the FAA in Atlanta.

In each case, the suspension came after a fatal crash.

A total of 284 people, including 256 U.S. soldiers on a military charter flight in Canada in 1986, died in the crashes.

Since then, the military has done its own inspections with a special unit based at Scott Air Force Base in Illinois.

None of Leisure Air's eight planes have had any accidents since the airline began operating two years ago.

But FAA records show that the airline has had problems since February that have led the FAA to propose \$165,000 in civil penalties for various safety and recordkeeping violations.

The airline is contesting allegations that it created a fire hazard by using blankets as seat covers, overworked pilots and kept improper flight records.

Joseph Archer Sr., who directed line maintenance at the former Piedmont Airlines, quit as Leisure Air's vice president of technical services at the end of June.

Now in Pittsburgh, Archer said he left because he disagreed with management over how Leisure Air was maintaining jets.

"ALL I HAD left after Piedmont was my reputation, and I wasn't about to see it go down," Archer said. "My expectations were high going in. Greed and ego of upper management were getting in the way of running a good airline."

Archer said he was not surprised with the seat-cover blanket violations the FAA found in August, violations that generated a proposed penalty of \$50,000.

Archer said: "They were adding too many inexperienced people."

Several other key Leisure Air executives have left this year, including Xavier E. Bethune, the director of business operations and son of Gordon Bethune, Continental Airlines' chief executive; and C.D. McLean, who was the senior vice president of the company; and Tiara Roberts, who was the director of inflight technical services.