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Safety Board to Study Commuter Airline Accidents

By RICHARD WITKIN OCT. 21, 1979

The National Transportation Safety Board, alarmed by the rise in commuter airline accidents, announced yesterday that it would hold an unusual hearing before all five board members to explore ways to correct shortcomings in the fastexpanding industry.

It will be only the second time that an inquiry on a pressing air safety matter has been held before all the board members since 1940, when the Civil Aeronautics Board, from which the safety board was spun off in 1967, began investigating United States aviation accidents. The only previous such inquiry, on collision hazards, was conducted in 1969.

Beginning Jan. 28, the panel is to look into evidence of "repeated safety deficiencies" such as shortcomings in operations, maintenance and training programs of some commuter airlines. The board said that it had also found "a lack of safety surveillance and enforcement over commuters" by the Federal Aviation Administration.

The chairman of the safety board, James B. King, said in announcing the hearing: "The commuters, for the most part, are doing a good job. We, of course, meet only those involved in accidents."

The more than 200 commuter airlines are small carriers to which air travelers have been shifting in significant numbers as the major airlines have dropped flights to many smaller towns to concentrate on more lucrative runs between bigger population centers. A year ago Congress gave the industry greater flexibility through passage of the aviation deregulation act.

The safety record of the commuter lines has always been greatly inferior to that of the larger lines. But official alarm has risen because of the expansion of the commuter industry and a rise in the number of accidents and deaths.

The announcement of the full-board inquiry came as the safety board prepared to open a hearing Tuesday in San Juan, P.R., on the July 24 crash of a commuter plane in St. Croix, V.I.

Eight of the 21 persons on board were killed when the four-engine piston plane, operated by Puerto Rico International Airlines (Prinair), took off in a steep climb, stalled and plunged out of control back onto the airport.

The investigation has disclosed that the plane, a British-made De Havilland Heron, was carrying passengers and freight that weighed more than 900 pounds above the legal takeoff minimum. It has also been determined, according to the safety board, that the craft was loaded so that the center of gravity was behind the allowable point.

There have been at least eight other major crashes of United States commuter airliners since the beginning of 1978. The rate per 100,000 takeoffs for accidents resulting in deaths is more than five times that for the regular larger carriers.

As a result of the St. Croix crash, the F.A.A. took action last month to exact a civil fine of \$9,000 from Prinair, which is the nation's largest commuter carrier. And last week, after a survey of the company by an aviation agency team, the agency notified Prinair of proposed penalties of \$169,000 for 1 alleged rules violations in its overall operation.

Under aviation agency procedures, the airline will have a chance to negotiate a compromise settlement lower than the amount the agency seeks. But, in any case, the sums sought far exceed anything the agency previously attempted to collect from a commuter carrier.

The experts say that commuter operations, by their very nature, will always be somewhat riskier than other airline travel. One reason is that commuter planes generally cannot fly above much of the bad weather that modern jetliners surmount. And they operate to many airports that are not as well equipped as those in large cities.

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