

Departures

Opinions On Current Issues In Aviation

'Hanging In, Hanging Out, Hanging On'

Roger Cohen, President of the Regional Airline Association

Country Western legend Tanya Tucker sang those lyrics about a forlorn love, while we in regional aviation could be singing the same song about some recent headlines. But the facts behind those headlines suggest we're doing a whole lot better than just "hanging on."

A Wall Street type calls regional jets "dinosaurs," while a small-town bureaucrat resurrects disco-era gripes about turboprops. A Michigan congressman calls scheduled airline service a "lifeline" for his community, then votes to kill the Essential Air Service program. An Aviation Daily columnist writing about regionals uses terms like "implode" and "destined for failure." The naysayers seem to think a resilient, resourceful industry barely over 35 years old has passed its "sell by" date when we haven't even reached middle age.

We used to joke at Northwestern journalism school, "Never let facts get in the way of a good story." And while our airlines are managing the real-world challenges of a tough economy and a dynamic airline landscape, the facts show we're "hanging in" amazingly well.

FACT: Most importantly, we're proud of our efforts helping make this the safest period in commercial aviation history. Three years ago, the Regional Airline Association (RAA) promised the traveling public and Congress that our members would do everything within its control to prevent another accident. Our more than 50,000 regional airline professionals have delivered on that promise.

The alphabet of gold-standard, voluntary safety programs (FOQA, ASAP et al.) have become universal across regional airlines large and small. RAA's fatigue study will provide ground-breaking science and real-world insight into the effects of multiple-segment flying. Regional officials have spent thousands of hours helping craft the most advanced safety practices to recruit, train and schedule commercial pilots. We acted, not because the government forced us to, but because it was the right thing to do.

FACT: Despite the shrinking, if not near elimination, of many connecting hub airports, regional airlines still provide 49% of the nation's scheduled flights, down just a fraction from our watershed high 51% pre-recession. And some 500

communities—74% of all airline-served airports—still enjoy service from regional airlines exclusively.

FACT: While Essential Air Service has become a convenient political punching bag, Congress last month overwhelmingly voted to preserve and strengthen this vital lifeline for some 150 communities. Airlines have kept their part of the bargain by working with communities on innovative service models, or, if necessary, by continuing to fly money-losing flights just to keep these airports linked to the global economy.

FACT: Your grandfather's regional airlines flew only to the smallest cities, while regionals today provide the majority of flights at major hubs like O'Hare, Detroit Metro, Houston Intercontinental and Philadelphia. Between the trio of New York City's three major airports (Newark Liberty, New York John F. Kennedy and New York LaGuardia) and those surrounding Washington, (Ronald Reagan Washington National, Dulles International and Thurgood Marshall Baltimore/Washington International) regionals fly a full 70% of the daily roundtrips. That's a pretty amazing batting average in the biggest of big leagues.

FACT: Regional aircraft increasingly feature iPads in the cockpit, first-class cabins and Wi-Fi. As for those 50-seat RJ "dinosaurs," few are parked, and more than 1,200 are flying safely and reliably in scheduled service every day. (BTW: Dinosaurs roamed the earth for 135 million years, so those RJs still have a ways to catch up.) And today's turboprops are so advanced, quiet, energy-efficient and passenger-friendly that manufacturers can't keep up with the global demand.

But don't just take our word for it, check it out for yourself. "Hang out" with the some 1,400 regional airline industry officials at RAA's 37th Annual Convention May 21-24 in Minneapolis. FAA Acting Administrator Michael Huerta is scheduled to be there, as are airplane builders from Canada, Brazil, France, Russia, Sweden and Japan, and companies large and small from every continent but Antarctica.

So like Tanya Tucker's song concludes "if you're wonderin' about wonderin' how we've been," the answer is "just fine." Maybe for not as long as the dinosaurs, but who knows? They didn't have iPads in their cockpits.

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