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30 Big Ones!
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NTSB Anniversary Report Marks 30 Years

The U.S. National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) recently celebrated its thirtieth anniversary by issuing a report (Lessons Learned and Lives Saved) highlighting the Board's achievements in improving safety in all modes of transportation. The report illustrates the NTSB-inspired safety advances that have been made in all phases of transportation and also lists the NTSB's "most wanted" safety improvements.

The NTSB, an independent safety investigation organization, became independent of the Department of Transportation in 1975. The NTSB is primarily known for its investigation of major transportation accidents. It investigates all U.S. civil aviation accidents, railway accidents involving passenger trains, major marine accidents, pipeline accidents, hazardous material releases and selected highway accidents. As a result of its investigations in the aviation field, the NTSB claims credit

for having inspired changes in aircraft icing prevention, airplane maintenance and inspections, stricter safety standards for commuter airline flight and improved crew communications in aviation.

In the cargo field, the NTSB's recommendations impelled the Federal Aviation Administration to require installation of sophisticated anti-collision systems on all large cargo aircraft flying into the United States. While such anti-collision systems, called Traffic Collision Avoidance Systems (TCAS), are standard equipment on passenger flying aircraft, cargo aircraft are now required to be equipped with TCAS systems. The TCAS systems alert cargo aircraft flight crews when they are too close to other aircraft during flight and offer the crew options to evade the obstacle. As a result of the NTSB's instigation, designated radio frequencies have been set up to allow for direct communications between airport fire and rescue crews and flight crews in the event of an emergency. The NTSB also established standardized hand signals for use in emergency situations when radio communications fail.

The NTSB was also instrumental in having the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Motor Carriers Safety Administration establish an electronic guide, available over the Federal Motor Carriers Safety Administration website, to alert long haul truck drivers as to public and private rest areas and parking spaces along routes. This result came out of a major safety investigation by the NTSB into numerous accident investigations involving driver fatigue. The NTSB was also instrumental in prompting the United States Department of Transportation to rewrite, for the first time in 60 years, service regulations concerning the duration of truck drivers' shifts. The regulations provide drivers with a work and rest schedule more in line with a person's body changes, with these regulations aimed at reducing driver fatigue and accidents. The regulations were based on the results of a 1990 NTSB study finding that the most frequently cited probable cause of fatal truck accidents was driver fatigue.

The NTSB also pushed for stronger fire safety standards for baggage and cargo compartments in large passenger aircraft. Regulations enacted by the FAA, at the prompting of the NTSB, prohibited airlines from carrying chemical oxygen generators in cargo compartments of passenger aircraft and instituted tougher packaging standards for those oxygen generators shipped in cargo aircraft. These changes are the result of the NTSB's investigation into the crash of the ValuJet DC-9 aircraft in the Florida Everglades in 1996.

The FAA also developed a hazmat education program that focuses on freight forwarders. At the instance of the NTSB, the FAA has also issued new regulations requiring shippers and freight forwarders to certify that packages being shipped do not contain unauthorized explosive destructive devices or hazardous materials.

The NTSB has also been active in urging airport operators to install devices to avoid airport ground collisions and to ameliorate the effects of aircraft overruns. As the result of the NTSB's investigation into overrun accidents at LaGuardia Airport, The Port Authority has installed arrestor beds at the end of runways at both Kennedy Airport and LaGuardia Airport. These arrestor systems are cellular concrete system that deform readily when struck by an aircraft, causing the drag forces to rapidly decelerate the aircraft.

As the result of the NTSB's work, the Federal Aviation Administration has issued numerous air traffic control bulletins to its controllers in the towers, emphasizing the high risk of collision to aircraft on the ground and the need to clearly state the route for all taxiing aircraft on the airport surface.

In addition to highlighting its successes over the last 30 years, the NTSB's Lessons Learned and Lived Saved also highlights the NTSB's "most wanted" safety improvements. In the field of aviation, these include urging the FAA to act to reduce dangers to aircraft flying in icing conditions, to eliminate flammable fuel and air vapors in fuel tanks, to stop runway incursions and ground collisions of aircraft, to improve audio and data recorders so that they retain at least two hours of audio, and to install video recorders in cockpits so as to give investigators more information to identify the often complex causes of aviation accidents.

The NTSB has been a strong force for safety improvement in the thirty years of its independent existence and its Lessons Learned report indicates that it intends to pursue an even more vigorous course of improving transportation safety over the next thirty years.

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