SCARCITY OF PILOTS THREATENS REGIONAL SERVICE AT FOUR CORNERS REGIONAL AIRPORT

News / Airports / Routes

The **Four Corners Regional Airport** manager says the airport may eventually lose its last commercial airline company because of a 2013 federal regulation that significantly increased the number of hours **pilots** must log before they can fly as a first officer -- or co-pilot -- in most passenger airplanes.

"Smaller communities are losing services," said Mike Lewis, the airport manager. "We're lucky. We still have service."

Great Lakes Airlines, the airport's last commercial airline company, scaled back its flights and the number of seats on each plane because they have fewer pilots who meet the federal regulation.

And that drop in activity has had other consequences. On Tuesday, Farmington City Council approved cutting in half the minimum property lease payment Avis Budget Car Rental Group Inc.

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pays because fewer passengers are driving rental cars out of the airport.

Industry experts say an airplane crash outside of Buffalo, N.Y., in February 2009 that killed all 49 passengers aboard and one person on the ground prompted creation of the 2013 Federal Aviation Administration regulation. The National Transportation Safety Board said crew fatigue and inexperience played a role in the crash.

First officers previously needed just 250 flight hours to work on most planes. But the FAA regulation now requires they have 1,500 hours, which is the same as the requirement for the captains they assist. This has caused a shortage in pilots and high demand for those who have the necessary number of hours, officials say.

And small, regional airlines like Great Lakes usually can't compete with large airlines -- such as US Airways Inc. or United Airlines -- for the experienced pilots, many of whom are paying off thousands of dollars in student loans.

As a result, Great Lakes now only does five departures from Farmington a day with 9-seat planes, CEO Doug Voss said. They used to do six a day with 19-seat planes, but reducing the number of seats allows them to bypass the federal regulation, Voss said.

According to data Lewis provided, 80 percent fewer people a year have boarded planes in Farmington since 2013. More than 15,600 people boarded airplanes in Farmington in 2013, but according to his projections, only about 3,100 people will have flown by the end of 2015.

More than 19,100 people boarded planes in Farmington in 2012, the airport's busiest year, with only one commercial airline company, according to the data.

Great Lakes used to fly out of Clovis and Silver City but stopped about a year and a half ago, New Mexico Department of Transportation spokeswoman Melissa Dosher said in an email. Great Lakes was the only commercial airline in those towns, Dosher said.

"There's just fewer pilots," Voss said. Asked whether Great Lakes can continue operating in Farmington under the current conditions, he said, "No one can sustain service without an improvement to how the supply (of pilots) is created. It's obviously a very serious problem."

But the federal regulation isn't exclusively responsible for the decline in available pilots, said Paul Lewis, director of policy for Eno Center for Transportation, a nonpartisan think tank. Becoming a pilot was already expensive, and it doesn't pay well, he said.

"It's not a direct link," he said of the regulation, "but I think you can definitely connect the dots."

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