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## Osgood: Iowa should worry about pilot shortage

Pamela Osgood Iowa Public Airports Association Nov 27, 2018 Updated 17 hrs ago

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CHRIS ZOELLER, The Globe Gazette

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Air service is vital to our state's key economic drivers. Iowa's largest employers rank air service in the top three factors influencing expansion and relocation decisions. Recently, major business relocations in other parts of the country have supported what our employers have stated: After nearly a century, Caterpillar moved its corporate

headquarters from Peoria, Illinois to Chicago, citing reliable air service as the top issue affecting the decision. A severe lack of qualified pilots is causing a contraction of air service nationwide. Until we reverse that trend, expect more employers to chase reliable service.

The aerospace industry is an important part Iowa's economy. The Iowa Department of Transportation-Office of Aviation identified 25 businesses which manufacture products or provide services that support the aerospace industry. Combined, these businesses account for 30,000 jobs, annual payroll of \$2.1 billion, and an annual economic output of \$3.9 billion. Without pilots, the industry suffers. As the industry declines, so do the thousands of jobs which support it.

By 2026, Iowa's annual economic loss due to the pilot shortage will top \$741 million and 7,000 jobs. The 10-year cumulative loss to Iowa, \$3.9 billion.

Every airport in the state will be negatively impacted. In total, 77 percent of Iowa's air service is on a regional airline. The majority of every airport's departures is on regional aircraft: 63 percent of Des Moines, 84 percent of Cedar Rapids/Iowa City, and 100 percent of Waterloo, Burlington, Dubuque, Fort Dodge, Mason City, and Sioux City.

Of equal value is our general aviation facilities, which support medical flights, charter flights, and ag aviation operations. All segments of Iowa's aviation system are feeling the negative consequences of the workforce shortage.

Regional airlines are the primary source for new hire pilots for mainline carriers. With Delta, United, Southwest, and American in a hiring frenzy the airlines that provide 77 percent of Iowa's daily departures are experiencing a critical shortage of pilots.

Industry forecasts predict by 2021 the national system will be short 5,000 pilots. Without the pilots, 500 aircraft will be grounded. The pilot shortage swells to nearly 15,000 by 2026 and nearly 1,500 aircraft will be parked. This is in spite of the fact that pay for regional airline pilots is higher than ever. Even as pay increases, so does the shortfall of pilots.

There is no silver bullet, but rather a handful of solutions for consideration.

First, FAA needs to approve additional pathways for pilots to accrue the hours necessary to get licensed. This needs to be done carefully, according to the best available science and technology, and with safety as the top priority.

Second, pilot training needs to be more accessible. Training is prohibitively expensive and not eligible for traditional student financial aid. Iowa boasts world class aviation institutions that would benefit from reforms. Additionally, Iowa's airport system support numerous, often family-owned and operated, flight schools.

Pilot training needs to be data-driven. The system should move prospective pilots safely and efficiently through their education, not erect arbitrary barriers to entry and completion. Those in aviation need to encourage more people to consider the profession. We cannot afford to see this through a competitive lens, pitting airlines, airports, and communities against each other.

We can make a difference, but this is no time for "Iowa nice." We need to talk openly and candidly about the economic impact. We need direct involvement from Iowa's congressional delegation, community development leaders, state and local elected officials and airports.

Iowa's economy demands a strong and robust aviation system. The time to act is now. Please contact your elected representatives and urge them to act.

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Pamela Osgood is manager of the Mason City Municipal Airport. She penned this column along with 20 other board members of the Iowa Public Airports Association.

