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Demand for nearly half a million new airline pilots over next 20 years raises safety concerns

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By Associated Press, Published: July 12

WASHINGTON — An industry forecast that nearly half a million new airline pilots will be needed worldwide over the next 20 years as airlines expand their fleets has raised safety concerns that airlines will hire lower caliber pilots as they struggle to fill slots.

Boeing, one of the world's largest makers of commercial jetliners, forecasts about 465,000 new pilots will be needed worldwide between now and 2031 as global economies expand and airlines take deliveries of tens of thousands of new commercial jetliners. The forecast includes 69,000 new pilots in the North America, mostly in the U.S. The greatest growth will be in the Asia-Pacific region, where an estimated 185,600 new pilots will be needed.

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Likewise, Boeing predicts 601,000 new aircraft maintenance technicians will be needed over the same period, with greatest demand — 243,500 technicians — in the Asia-Pacific region. An estimated 92,500 new technicians will North America.

The rising global demand for airline pilots has raised concern among industry and government officials that there will be a global and a domestic pilot shortage.

“In many regions of the world, a pilot shortage is already here,” the Boeing forecast said. “Asia Pacific in particular is experiencing delays and operational interruptions due to pilot scheduling constraints.”

That's particularly true in China and India, industry officials said. Airlines based in Asia and the Middle East have been holding pilot job fairs in the U.S. and thousands of pilots laid off due to U.S. airline bankruptcies and mergers are now flying for foreign carriers.

“We have airlines around the world as they buy our airplanes and come to us on the training side of the house, saying ‘We're struggling to fill (pilot) seats. Can you help us?’” said Carl Davis, Boeing's chief of pilot services. Davis presented his company's forecast Thursday at a conference in Washington on pilot training hosted by the Air Line Pilots Association, the world's largest pilot union.



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U.S. industry and government officials are also concerned that the rising global demand for pilots, combined with an anticipated wave in pilot retirements and tougher qualification standards for new pilots that kick-in next year, will create a domestic shortage as well.

“I’m concerned because it has safety implications,” John Allen, the Federal Aviation Administration’s director of flight services, told The Associated Press.

Allen said he wants to spur a discussion among industry, labor unions, and academia about a potential shortage that will “really look at this and address it, not to just sweep it under the rug ... Is this a problem? And, if it is a problem, how bad is it?”

He said he is fearful that if there is a shortage, airlines will hire pilots who are technically qualified but don’t have the “right stuff.”

“If the industry is stretched pretty thin ... that can result in someone getting into the system that maybe isn’t really the right person to be a pilot. Not everybody is supposed to be a pilot,” Allen said.

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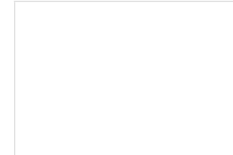
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