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# Firemen removed from 15 airports

## Safety reduced, unions warn

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OTTAWA – The Department of Transport removed firefighters from 15 smaller airports and trimmed funding for emergency response services at 10 others last Saturday, a budget-related cutback that has led to accusations of reduced safety for travellers and flight crews.

Canadian pilots joined displaced firefighters yesterday to protest against what they call a compromising of standards to comply with the government's fiscal agenda. That accusation was quickly rejected by Transport Minister Douglas Young.

"Emergency response services at the affected airports will now fall below the International Civil Aviation Organization and other commonly accepted standards," said Captain Brian Boucher, the Canadian Air Line Pilots Association's expert on ground services and firefighting.

Canada's major international airports, the only ones strictly subject to the ICAO standards, are not affected by the cutbacks and would be forced by international pressure to maintain those standards in any case, Capt. Boucher said.

While other Canadian airports are required only to meet standards set by Transport Canada, the ICAO rules have been a reference point.

The ICAO standard advises that emergency response vehicles should be able to reach the end of the farthest runway in not more than three minutes, but ideally in two minutes in normal conditions. Transport Canada has adjusted its own requirement to apply only to the midpoint of the farthest runway, usually a shorter distance from the firehall.

The Union of Canadian Transport Employees, which represents 500 airport firefighters, is arguing safety in a bid to reverse the cuts, and has formed a coalition of unions representing most workers in the aviation industry.

The cuts amount to "playing Russian roulette" with the lives of air travellers and workers, the coalition said yesterday.

Emergency response services at the 15 airports where firefighters have been eliminated

will now be provided by municipal fire departments, which do not have firefighters trained in the specialized techniques for dealing with airplane fires.

Some of the municipal services are as much as 30 minutes away from the airports.

Transport Canada has reacted strongly to try to thwart the union's public-awareness campaign, warning that any department employee caught distributing publicity material will face disciplinary action.

Employees are prohibited by Transport Canada policy from publicly criticizing government policy, Victor Barbeau, the assistant deputy minister responsible for airports, said in an interview yesterday.

"That rule applies to the whole civil service," he added, arguing that only elected officers of public service unions have the right to comment on government policy.

The pilots and the other union groups are stressing the importance of having firefighters at the airports because response time in the case of aircraft fires is crucial. They also say 75 per cent of all air disasters occur on the runway within 500 feet of the centre line and within 3,000 feet of the takeoff or landing point.

"As an airline captain, I want to know that properly trained firefighters can be there within two minutes, or it's all over," Capt. Boucher said.

The pilots' representative was supported by Denise Hill, president of the airline division of the Canadian Union of Public Employees, which represents 7,500 flight attendants.

"The public perception of air travel in Canada is that it is safe and in the event of an emergency, flight attendants and trained airport firefighters in sufficient numbers will assist passengers to evacuate the aircraft and rescue survivors from a crash. The reality is quite different," she told the news conference.

Mr. Young discounted the safety allegations in a prepared statement. "There is no question that Transport Canada will continue to maintain the high level of aviation and airport safety Canadians have come to expect. Canada's air transportation system is safe."

He also said his department's proposed regulations on emergency-response services

will be supplemented by new aviation rules to enhance safety and security.

Mr. Barbeau said on-site firefighting is only one small part of the overall system of air safety.

Each of these airports will have an emergency response plan, which includes providing early warning to local fire departments if a plane is experiencing difficulties.

The department has been planning the cutbacks for a year and has been consulting all sectors of the industry, Mr. Barbeau said. "We want the right number of people with the right equipment in the right location depending on the degree of risk. We are trying to assure the very best degree of safety while putting in motion a level of service which makes some sense."

Even with the cutbacks, 94 per cent of air travellers will pass through airports with on-site emergency services. But in 21 regional airports, including places such as Victoria and London, Ont., that service will be provided by a single firefighter with a single foam-spraying truck.

Mr. Barbeau also disputes the union contentions that reducing the size of crews reduces safety. The principal obligation of the firefighters is to provide a fire-free path for passengers and crew leaving the plane and the department will be purchasing new trucks with increased foam capacities in single-vehicle stations.

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## Where firefighters were eliminated

Here are the 15 airports that lost their firefighters on Saturday, a coalition of unions says:

**Newfoundland:** Wabush.

**Nova Scotia:** Yarmouth.

**Quebec:** Mont-Joli, Sept-Iles, Val D'Or and Baie-Comeau.

**Manitoba:** Churchill and The Pas

**Alberta:** Fort McMurray and Lethbridge.

**British Columbia:** Fort Nelson, Quesnel, Sandspit, Smithers and Williams Lake.

The article EM9508 reprinted above is used in Figure 7.15 of the STAT 220 Course Materials.