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Steven Chealander of the National Transportation Safety Board speaks at a news conference Saturday in the Buffalo Niagara Marriott in Amherst.

Harry Scull Jr./Buffalo News

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Two carriers stopped flights of prop planes in cold weather

Safety expert raps FAA for minimizing icing risks

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WASHINGTON — Two airlines stopped flying turboprop planes in icy climates after deadly crashes similar to the one that claimed 50 lives Thursday in Clarence — and the nation’s former top transportation safety official said the lessons of such earlier crashes should have prevented last

week's tragedy.

Both American Eagle and Comair ended their cold-weather use of turboprop planes at least partly out of safety concerns. But Colgan Air, the subcontractor that runs Continental Airlines commuter flights like the one that crashed in Clarence, still flies turboprops in February from Newark to Buffalo.

Aviation experts said it is far too soon to blame the Clarence crash on icing, but the National Transportation Safety Board noted that the plane's crew reported significant ice buildup on the plane's wings.

Aviation experts said icing can cause a plane to suddenly lose control — which is why Jim Hall, the safety board's former chairman, said federal regulators should do much more to make sure icing won't bring down more planes.

“What made this crash more than tragic was that it was foreseeable and likely preventable if not for the preference of profit over safety in some of the aviation industry and for the lax oversight of the Federal Aviation Administration in its failure to adequately address known safety risks related to icing,” Hall said.

Neither Pinnacle Airlines, which owns Colgan Air, or Bombardier, the Canadian firm that built the Dash 8 Q400 plane that crashed in Clarence, returned requests for comment for this story.

But Laura Brown, an FAA spokesman, took issue with Hall's comments, saying the FAA has been pushing for improvements to prevent icing accidents for years now.

“And as a result, accidents involving icing have been reduced significantly in the last 15 years,” Brown said.

‘Caribbean fleet’

Then again, they could have been reduced in part because two of the nation's largest commuter airlines, American Eagle and Comair, stopped flying turboprop planes in cold weather.

After an American Eagle turboprop went down in icy conditions in Indiana in 1994, the airline “really made [turboprops] their Caribbean fleet,” said Jim Kreindler, an attorney who represented the families of victims of that Indiana crash, which claimed 68 lives.

American Eagle officials could not be reached to comment, but the National Transportation Safety Board's report on that accident says the plane, en route from Indianapolis to Chicago, lost control because of ice accumulation. The ATR 72-210 turboprop was not equipped to handle icing and plummeted to the ground in Roselawn, Ind.

“The airplane was susceptible to this loss of control, and the crew was unable to recover,” the board's report concluded.

As for Comair, that airline abandoned turboprops entirely after a Jan. 9, 1997, flight from Cincinnati to Detroit nose-dived 18 miles short of the runway, killing all 29 people aboard.

Comair eliminated turboprops from its fleet in the late 1990s because regional commuter jets are simply better aircraft, said Jeff Puth, a company spokesman.

“I'm sure there was a safety element to it,” Puth added.

After the Comair crash, the safety board issued a devastating report that echoed Hall's comments holding the FAA responsible for the Clarence crash.

“The probable cause of this accident was the Federal Aviation Administration's failure to establish

adequate aircraft certification standards for flight in icing conditions,” said the report, which also blamed the FAA for failing to enforce proper deicing procedures and failing to require the establishment of adequate minimum airspeeds in icy weather.

Hall was chairman of the safety board at the time of both the Indiana and Michigan crashes, but he is by no means alone in warning of the dangers of icing, particularly for turboprop planes.

“Even a small amount of ice buildup can significantly decrease the lift force and increase the drag of an aircraft,” said Puneet Singla, Ph. D., assistant professor of mechanical and aerospace engineering at the University at Buffalo.

And the wings of turboprop planes are far more likely to encounter icing problems than jets are, for two reasons.

Turboprops fly at a slower speed, making it easier for ice to accumulate, said Kreindler, the lawyer in the lawsuit that followed the Indiana crash.

In addition, “turboprops spend a much larger percentage of time in those altitudes where icing is likely to occur,” said William R. Voss, a former FAA official who now serves as president of the Flight Safety Foundation.

Hall said he is particularly concerned about turboprop planes that are equipped with pneumatic deicing boots, which he, in an op-ed submitted to The Buffalo News, called “a technology invented in the 1930s which has not changed much since.”

The heated wing technology that jets use is much more effective in controlling ice, said Hall, who faulted the FAA for consistently ignoring the safety board’s recommendations for tighter icing controls on turboprop planes.

“The FAA should ground all aircraft of this type until the NTSB investigation is completed and it is clear they can be operated safely,” said Hall, who headed the safety board from 1994 through 2001.

But Brown, of the FAA, said: “I don’t think we have any information that would cause us to ground the aircraft.”

Reforms slow

While Hall contended that the new model of the plane that crashed in Buffalo was not adequately tested before it was approved for use, Brown said that model included a modernized deicing system to meet an upcoming upgrade in the FAA’s standards.

Despite Brown’s contention that the aviation agency has toughened its standards on icing, the safety board says the FAA has ignored the safety board’s call for greater icing regulation for 12 years now. And neither Hall nor Steven Chealander, the safety board member who is currently in Buffalo to investigate Thursday’s crash, are pleased about it.

“The serious safety risks posed by icing conditions must be addressed for more than just the short term,” Hall said. “I hope that this accident will finally cause the FAA and the commercial aviation industry to take these risks seriously so that a tragedy such as this will not happen again.”

Meanwhile, at a news conference in Buffalo, Chealander held up a pamphlet that read: “NTSB Most Wanted List Transportation Safety Improvements,” which includes several recommendations regarding icing.

“They’re recommendations that we feel are being moved too slowly, or for other reasons, we feel needed added emphasis,” Chealander said.

For example, the safety board wants to require that airplanes with pneumatic deicing boots activate the devices earlier.

“The process has been to activate the boost system once you recognize that there’s ice formed on the wings. We recommend that you maybe turn it on sooner than that,” Chealander said.

At the same time, Chealander stopped far short of Hall’s comments, and far short of criticizing the turboprop plane that crashed in Clarence.

“This Dash 8 is a workhorse airplane,” he said, stressing that investigators have not yet identified icing as the cause of the Buffalo crash. “It’s not real susceptible to ice. It flies in ice all the time. I’ve talked to some Continental pilots today who fly it. That’s not a concern.”

Asked about the fact that two airlines have already stopped flying propeller planes in the Northeast due to icing conditions, Chealander wouldn’t comment.

“I don’t want to get into that, because then you’re going to come up with speculation and analyze [this accident],” he said.

News Staff Reporter Brian Meyer contributed to this report. jzremski@buffnews.com .

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