

Testimony of
John Carey
Before the House Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Aviation
Hearing on U.S. Airways Flight 1549
February 24, 2009

Mr. Chairman, and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you this afternoon.

Most especially we would like to acknowledge the crew of flight 1549 who, because of their bravery and heroics and exceptional airmanship saved their passengers lives, and have given our country a chance to proudly celebrate. They have also given us the opportunity to reflect on the state of aviation safety.

Because we are a party to this ongoing NTSB investigation, we will not comment on specific areas that would compromise the investigation. The Safety Board, in our opinion, has put a very appropriate emphasis on this investigation, and we are pleased to be a party. The reason we are a party and the reason that we are here today is to work toward preventing future accidents and to promote aviation safety. Airline pilots have a long tradition of safety advocacy; Capt. Sullenberger is a prime example. It is one thing to talk about being a safety advocate, but airline pilots “walk the walk.” Pilot safety volunteers work tirelessly, while dues paying members reach into their pockets each month to support these on going safety activities. Even now while working under bankruptcy era contracts, our pilots continue to fund these all important safety projects. Each and every budget contains significant funding for safety.

Nothing could be more gratifying than to see our colleagues from other Flight Crew unions joining us here today. On the afternoon of Jan. 15 every airline pilot in the world put themselves into the cockpit of flight 1549. We have all thought the ultimate, “what if I had been at the controls.” We all share these feelings, and in a very real way, Sully and Jeff have united us. Their professionalism in the cockpit, the poise that they have displayed during and after the event and their personal demeanor has been an inspiration to every pilot. In all of the hangar flying that has taken place since this event, nobody has second guessed the actions of this crew. Not many would predict a similar outcome, were they faced with the same dilemma, which is extremely unprecedented. Airline pilots are their own most severe critics, however, this case is one in which there is no training and almost all agree that a successful outcome would at best be a long shot.

Many things went into the successful outcome of flight 1549. Clearly we had vast experience on the flight deck that day. What is also evident is that the pilots and flight attendants, as individuals are among the best and the brightest that our society has to offer. In addition, our industry was built on many core safety principals which continue to

serve us well. This crew has embraced these principals, and successfully demonstrated them during flight 1549.

Regarding crew experience, the industry contraction has had an unintended positive effect. In our opinion, First officer Jeff Skiles is a prime example. Having been with the airline in excess of twenty years, and having previously served as a Captain, his presence on the flight deck significantly contributed to the successful outcome of flight 1549. Due to attrition, this will not last. The greatest hope that we have of ensuring experience on the flight deck in the future is to promote and support a thriving airline industry. A successful airline industry is the most important factor in attracting and retaining qualified pilots. Competitive salary and benefits are central to attracting and retaining a qualified pilot workforce. Congress must also step up to ensure that employee's pensions are protected. By protecting their pensions you ensure that the new hire pilots will remain in the cockpits of our airliners and become the Captain Sullenbergers of the future. The Akaka amendment will go a long way toward attaining that goal.

When we talk about core safety values, FAA oversight and regulation is critical. Lack of FAA leadership in developing regulatory guidance for the implementation of "Safety Management Systems" (SMS) has stagnated the advancement of the industry safety agenda. FAA needs to commission an Aviation Rulemaking committee (ARC) to push this agenda forward. Although some in the industry have voluntarily begun programs, the standards are not uniform and the quality can largely be debated. Without a pure SMS standard, such as those developed by ICAO, individual elements such as FOQA, ASAP, and AQP and LOSA are all administered differently, thus making airline safety irregular at best.

Talking specifically about issues which may be germane to this flight 1549, bird mitigation seems to be a very elusive problem, especially the further from the airport and the higher the altitude. Although much has already been done, further funding and study will be necessary to develop additional means for mitigation. FAA review of FAR 139 relating to wild life hazards should be undertaken immediately.

The failure of the engines on flight 1549 should prompt a fresh look at engine design and certification standards. Although the investigation is ongoing, it seems clear from the facts in the public domain, that we have new data in which to look at bird ingestion. FAA leadership is also critical towards this effort.

The evacuation and rescue phase was unprecedented. Although training in ditching is conducted, it has never been tested in this arena. To safely evacuate 155 people, in this environment is a miracle in itself. The fact that this was all done with the rear two exits and rafts unavailable makes success almost an impossibility. One thing is clear, the entire crew performed heroically throughout the entire evacuation and rescue. They are true heroes and are recognized as such. Additionally, all of those who operated the rescue watercraft and the others who performed heroically and unselfishly on the river that day should also be recognized.

Open questions remain as to the survivability of the aircraft. Due to the heroics and rapid response of all involved, the sustainability of the aircraft did not become a factor. However, the fact that the aircraft sank to the point that the rear exits and rafts were unusable and did not remain afloat very long after the rescue, should be a concern for future accidents. Hopefully the investigation will shed light on this issue as facts are discovered.

As we further analyze this accident we should realize that our brief 5 minute testimony this afternoon has lasted approximately as long as flight 1549. With a normal takeoff and climb we should realize how little time our pilots had to analyze the situation and make a critical decision where to land, in one of the most heavily populated areas of the world. All this while attempting to restart failed engines, prepare the aircraft for ditching, and communicate with ATC and the flight attendants and passengers in the cabin.

I would like to reiterate our commitment to enhancing aviation safety as this investigation goes forward, and thank the committee for the opportunity to testify today.

I would also be happy to address any questions.