

TRANSPORT CANADA UNDER REVIEW

It is now well-known that Transport Canada unfortunately obtained a very poor grade in the review conducted by International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). The audit performed by the specialized agency of the United Nations that “coordinates the principles and techniques of international air navigation and fosters the planning and development of international air transport to ensure safe and orderly growth” revealed that Transport Canada, and de facto Canada, is not compliant with ICAO recognized dissent practices when not compliant with established standards.

This raises a lot of concerns and will inevitably cause some uninformed people to wrongfully question the safety of air travel in Canada. This would be a gross injustice to air travel in Canada and to all those who provide it. Canada has one of the world’s best safety records. The poor mark given by ICAO relates to Transport Canada’s oversight mandate and for its lack of compliance with ICAO standards and is not the organization’s evaluation of the safety of Canada’s air carriers.

The audit found multiple lapses in Transport Canada’s supervision of the country’s airlines, commercial pilots, air traffic control and licensing regimes. With a score of 64%, the Department has gone from the top of the class in 2005 with a score of 95% to a deplorable barely passing grade. This should not be a surprise to anyone, as the department’s aviation safety oversight budget has not kept up with the growth in demand for air services in Canada over the past 20 years.

According to information reported by the media, a team of 12 ICAO employees performed the audit over the first two weeks of June and reported that Canada scored 23 per cent on aircraft operations; 67 per cent in personnel training and licensing; and 67 per cent in air navigation services.

Aircraft incident investigation, a responsibility not assigned to the Department but to the Transportation Safety Board, scored the highest at 83 per cent. This is an indication that this scathing performance review obtained by Transport Canada is the result of poor strategic decisions and management at the highest level in that department in the face of budget cuts.

ICAO has seemingly agreed to carry out a new audit in 2025 “given the work Transport Canada has undertaken to be closer aligned with ICAO’s international standards”. While industry would be happy to see our regulator obtain a better score, we are very concerned that much of the department’s energy will be focused on

improving the grade, to the detriment of the already very poor level of service provided to the aviation industry in Canada on many important files.

To blame this poor performance on the fact that Canada opted for Safety Management Systems shortly after the 2005 audit is a false redirection of blame. SMS has had a huge benefit on aviation safety and finances in Canada. SMS has significantly increased the safety culture throughout the commercial aviation infrastructure. It must be strongly emphasized that the low score obtained by Transport Canada does not relate to aviation safety in Canada but relates to the regulator’s oversight management.

Industry is very concerned that this score will wrongfully question aviation safety in Canada in the eyes of our economic partners and the flying public. This interpretation of the ICAO audit could make flying to various jurisdictions internationally more complex, if not impossible. Some countries that have scored as badly as Canada, have in the past seen their flying privileges restricted in regions such as Europe.

It is vitally important that Transport Canada immediately take ownership and address problems reported in the ICAO Audit. They should not deflect responsibility in a way that could suggest that aviation in Canada is compromised when in actual fact, aviation safety in this country has never been higher based on factual safety data as reflected in the Transportation Safety Board of Canada annual report.

ATAC has been suggesting for over a decade lobbying the Department to relinquish some bureaucratic responsibilities and concentrate on its core responsibility, which is oversight of aviation safety in Canada. The department is facing the same labour shortages and lack of industry experience as the rest of the aviation industry and should focus its resources on addressing that key mandate. The delegation of bureaucratic responsibilities to qualified third parties would be a first step in allowing the Department to concentrate its limited and dwindling resources where it really matters. This situation is especially aggravated by the \$8.2 billion budget cuts announced by the federal government to begin in 2024-25. The following questions remain to be answered on how much is Transport expected to cut and still be able to carry out its mandate and ramp up before its next ICAO audit? What services are to be cut, or most likely to be compromised, and what new fees and charges will once again be imposed on our industry?