

FORBES > BUSINESS > AEROSPACE & DEFENSE

Bitter Battle Rages Over Effort To Raise Pilot Retirement Age To 67

Ted Reed Senior Contributor @
Charlotte-based reporter Ted Reed covers airlines and airline labor.

Follow

Feb 8, 2024, 10:57am EST

Updated Feb 8, 2024, 10:56pm EST



ALPA President Jason Ambrosi says "special interests" want to raise pilot retirement age. DELTA ALPA

The battle over whether pilots older than 65 should fly commercial jets is still raging, although many in the airline industry say the pilot shortage has ended, eliminating the need.

The contentious issue is being addressed as part of Federal Aviation Administration reauthorization, which has become one more area where the Senate version is in conflict with the House version. The Senate version generally has the support of labor including the Air Line Pilots Association.

“Raising the pilot retirement age is a solution in search of a problem,” ALPA President Jason Ambrosi said Wednesday, during a press conference. “Labor doesn’t want it; airlines are not calling for it, and the FAA says it shouldn’t happen. I’m not sure why we should be arguing about this.”

At the press conference, Ambrosi was joined by Liz Shuler, president of the AFL-CIO and Greg Reagan, president of the AFL-CIO Transportation Trades Department, an indication of labor backing. ALPA represents 77,000 pilots at 43 U.S. and Canadian airlines.

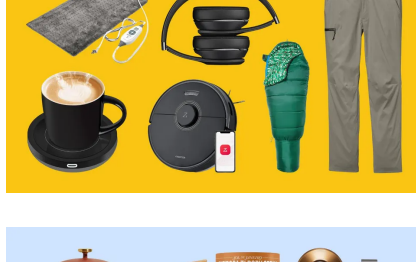
Asked who is advocating to raise the age, Ambrosi responded, “It’s a small group of special interests, a small group of pilots nearing retirement age. I can’t hold that against them.” He said regional airlines and some legislators also want the age to be raised. But he questioned why regional airlines support the measure, since it has “no impact on regionals. Maybe 50 pilots at the regionals would be able to continue flying.”

A point of contention is whether there is still a pilot shortage. On Monday, in a press release, ALPA provided FAA data showing that the agency issued 11,225 airline pilot certificates during the 2023 calendar year. The number exceeded both forecasts and demand, ALPA said.

MORE FROM FORBES VETTED

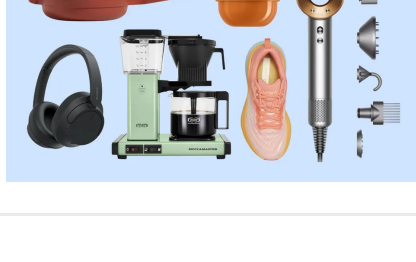
70+ Early Black Friday Deals: Save Up To 50% On Beauty, Tech And More

By **Jordan Thomas** Forbes Staff



The 116 Best Black Friday Deals So Far, According To Our Editors

By **Kara Cuzzone** Forbes Staff



“For months, corporate special interests in Washington have been crying wolf about a lack of available, qualified airline pilots, misrepresenting the facts in a naked attempt to protect to their profits,” Ambrosi said, in a prepared statement. “Once again, the data demonstrates that America does not have a pilot supply problem.”

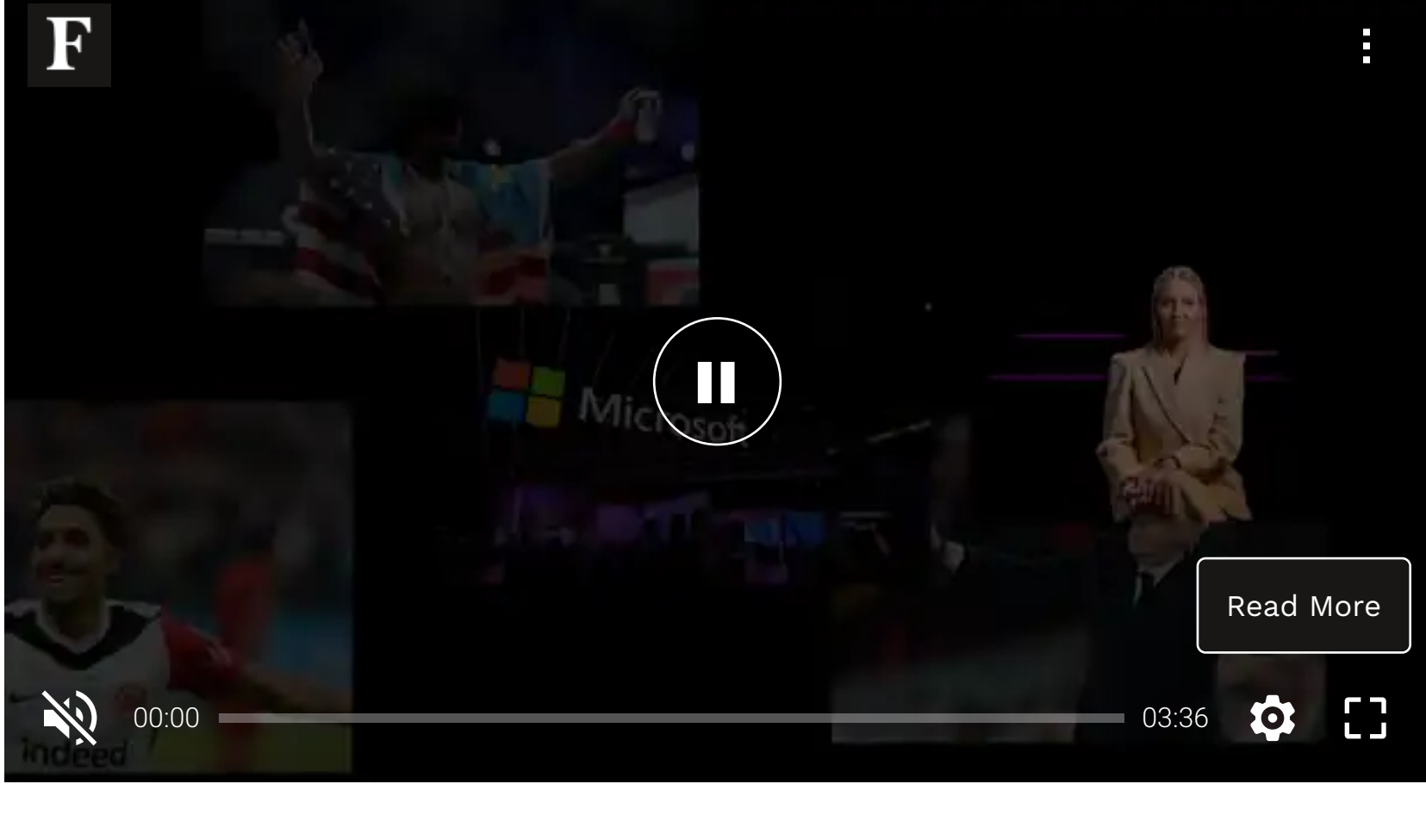
Forbes Daily: Join over 1 million Forbes Daily subscribers and get our best stories, exclusive reporting and essential analysis of the day’s news in your inbox every weekday.

Email address

Sign Up

By signing up, you agree to receive this newsletter, other updates about Forbes and its affiliates' offerings, our Terms of Service (including resolving disputes on an individual basis via arbitration), and you acknowledge our Privacy Statement. Forbes is protected by reCAPTCHA, and the Google Privacy Policy and Terms of Service apply.

However, on Thursday, the Regional Airline Association, which represents 16 regional airlines, issued a press release headlined “Groundhog Day Is Over, But ALPA Disinformation Plays On Repeat.” RAA said the FAA data in fact shows that while 11,225 pilots were certified, major airlines hired 12,193 pilots, leading to a shortfall of 968 pilots. “This follows an even more severe shortfall in 2022, where major airlines hired 13,128 pilots, while only 9,491 new pilots qualified,” RAA said.



“With a shortage of at least 4,605 pilots, 400 aircraft were parked and 317 U.S. airports lost an average of 25% of their flights, more than forty airports lost more than half of their flights, and 12 airports lost all air service,” RAA said, adding “It is unacceptable that a well-resourced, large union with enormous political giving, representing some of the country’s highest earning professionals, would call smaller airlines and the communities they serve ‘special interests.’ ALPA wants retirement caps because its interest is “controlling the pilot supply to preserve their preceived wage bargaining advantage,” RAA said.

RAA and aging pilots have the support of members of congress including Rep. Troy Nehls, R-Texas, sponsor of an amendment that would raise the age.

“Any organization or association denying the fact that there is a pilot shortage in our country is simply out of touch with reality,” Nehls said Wednesday in an email. “Just because the FAA is issuing airline pilot certificates does not mean that our country has enough experienced pilots to ensure every person flying makes it home safely or to meet our country’s future needs. Letting experienced pilots fly and train the next generation of pilots is a key step to bringing back safety and effectiveness to airline travel.”

The FAA has urged Senators not to raise the mandatory pilot retirement age to 67 from 65 years old without study. In a letter sent Monday to leaders of the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee, FAA Administrator Mike Whitaker wrote, “As Congress considers policies that affect the pool of pilots that may serve Part 121 commercial operations, We strongly encourage preceding that type of change with appropriate research so that the FAA can measure any risk associated with that policy and define appropriate mitigations.”

On Thursday, the committee voted 14-13 to reject the effort to raise the mandatory pilot retirement age from 65 to 67. and move the bill to the full Senate. Ambrosi applauded the vote in a press release, noting “By fighting back against attempts to introduce uncertainty, risk and changes to collective bargaining agreements by increasing the pilot retirement age and rolling back training requirements, this bill will help ensure our country remains a global leader in aviation.”

Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants, also applauded the effort. “We call on the Senate to urgently take up this bill for full passage,” she said in a prepared statement. “It’s critical that Congress finish its work on the FAA bill before the current extension expires March 8.”

Meanwhile, on the Frontier Airlines earnings call on Tuesday, CEO Barry Biffle said pilot shortages are no longer a problem. “On the pilot side we’ve seen a dramatic change in the market place,” Biffle said, responding to an analyst question about pilot availability. “When you see the regionals being able to be staffed, I think that tells you everything you need to know about the shortage of pilots. So we don’t see any challenges there.”

Follow me on [Twitter](#) or [LinkedIn](#).

Ted Reed

Follow

Ted Reed joined Forbes in 2012. He has been a reporter for *Miami Herald*, *Fresno Bee*, *Sac Bee* and *TheStreet*. He was also US Airways staff writer. His books... [Read More](#)

Editorial Standards

Forbes Accolades

ADVERTISEMENT

Join The Conversation

🔥 Comments 8

One Community. Many Voices. Create a free account to share your thoughts. Read our community guidelines [here](#).