

## CONFERENCE ON EYJAFJALLAJÖKULL AND AVIATION

15-16 September 2010, Keflavik Airport, Iceland

### FIRST CONFERENCE SESSION

## European volcanic upset could have been avoided

by **David Learmount**, Safety Editor *FLIGHT International and Flight Global*.

European air transport need not have been immobilised by the Eyjafjallajökull volcanic eruptions in April because the knowledge of how to deal safely with the conditions existed, a conference on the subject at the Keilir Aviation Academy, Keflavik, Iceland has heard.

Volcanologist Dr Haraldur Sigurdsson revealed that the Eyjafjallajökull eruption was minuscule on a historic scale, even in the past 100 years, and that much more powerful events were just a matter of time.

The Conference on Eyjafjallajökull and Aviation learned that existing knowledge, properly employed, could have prevented a monetary loss that the European Commission's director of air transport Daniel Calleja-Crespo estimated at €1.7 billion to the airlines. Stephen Perkins, head of the OECD's joint transport research centre, put global primary and secondary losses at \$1.1 trillion.

At the time of the eruptions the necessary knowledge and expertise was dispersed all over the world among individual volcanologists, meteorologists, engine and airframe manufacturers, and airlines. It had not been assembled, by the International Civil Aviation Organisation - nor any other organisation - with a view to creating a volcanic ash contingency plan for an eruption such as Eyjafjallajökull's.

Certainly no-one had shared this dispersed expertise with regulators or national aviation authorities, except on a local basis by countries with regular volcanic activity within their sovereign airspace.

But none of the latter had reason to anticipate an ash cloud that would affect a large, high-density traffic area comparable with that of northern and central Europe. Their experiences had resulted in the ICAO advice prevailing at the time of the Eyjafjallajökull eruption, which was to avoid all volcanic ash on the grounds that it was almost always possible to re-route aircraft around it, under it or over it.

Calleja-Crespo spelled out the policy options available for future events. These, he said, are to maintain the status quo that immobilised Europe; to improve the quality of information supplied to airlines and to leave the responsibility for go/no-go decisions to them; or to re-define atmospheric ash density risks according to lessons learned recently, and impose zoning decisions on the airlines.

During the conference the drift appeared to favour providing high-quality information to the airlines and leaving the flight-by-flight risk management to them. Calleja-Crespo revealed that the 44 European Civil Aviation Conference member states will be presenting a resolution on the subject to the imminent ICAO assembly.

The International Air Transport Association's director for safety and operations Gunther Matschnigg characterised Europe's April reaction to Eyjafjallajökull as "risk-averse, not risk management". He advised learning from airline standard operating procedures that had been tested over time.

The unpreparedness of Europe does not seem so surprising when **Icelandair**, the primary aviation inhabitant of this seismically active island, revealed that it began discussing what it would do following a serious ash event only a year before Eyjafjallajökull erupted.

But as a result it was the only airline with contingency plans when the event happened, and operated 85% of its schedules.

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**SOURCE:**Flight International

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