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NewScientistSpace

NASA chief Michael Griffin has promised to make public the results of a survey on US airline safety that suggests that near-collisions, engine failures and other serious problems are much more common than previously thought. NASA had previously refused to release the information, arguing that it may alarm the US public and harm struggling airlines.

At a US congressional hearing on Wednesday, Griffin said a NASA employee "misspoke" in using those reasons to withhold the survey results.

The data comes from a four-year airline safety survey based on telephone interviews of 24,000 commercial pilots and 5000 private pilots in the US about events that can cause crashes - such as bird strikes and engine failure, and about near-misses in the air and on runways.

According to the results, they're much more common than had been indicated by other air safety monitoring efforts (about 30,000 near misses are voluntarily reported each year to the national Aviation Safety Reporting System, for example).

The Associated Press requested the results of the \$11 million, taxpayer-funded survey - known as the National Aviation Operations Monitoring Service (NAOMS) - more than a year ago under the US Freedom of Information Act, but a NASA representative refused to hand them over. That caused a ruckus in the US and landed Griffin in front of the House Committee on Science and Technology on Wednesday.

"NASA should be in the business of putting information in front of the public, not withholding it," said committee member Ralph Hall.

Tough questioning

Committee chair Bart Gordon agreed: "[The agency] needs to focus on maintaining and increasing the safety of the air-travelling public - not protecting the commercial air carriers."

Responding to tough questioning from the committee, Griffin said NASA mismanaged the project, which was carried out by a contractor, and that a NASA employee gave the wrong reason to withhold the results.

In fact, Griffin said, the data could not be legally released because they contained information about specific incidents that could identify a pilot or airline. Griffin said the data are now being scrubbed to remove such identifying information and should be released by the end of the year.

Multiple reports

Griffin's apologies did not satisfy some committee members. "I don't call it a mistake, I call it negligence," said Laura Richardson, whose California district includes Los Angeles International Airport, one of the busiest in the world. Daniel Lipinski, vice chairman of the committee, characterised the situation as a result of "either complete incompetence, or I could use the word 'cover-up'." Griffin denied allegations that NAOMS was closed down prematurely and that data were destroyed.

Robert Dodd, an aviation safety consultant hired for the NAOMS project, testified that it should be restarted and said he was "disappointed and perplexed" that NASA hasn't released the results. He doesn't think they would dissuade Americans from flying. "US air travel is the safest mode of travel in the world," he added.

Jon Krosnick, a professor at Stanford University in the US and an expert on survey methodology, said he suspects the reason that NAOMS revealed more frequent safety problems than other safety monitoring efforts is that the data were not corrected to account for multiple reports of a single event by several pilots.