

by Joseph R. Perone/The Star-Ledger Friday April 25, 2008, 6:00 AM

The bulletin was a sign of the times.

Continental Airlines told its pilots in a notice last fall to consider the effect on their pensions and profit-sharing before carrying extra fuel on flights to Newark Liberty International Airport from Europe.

The revelation was contained in a report released this month by federal authorities looking into whether planes traveling to Newark from European cities arrived low on fuel. The issue illustrates the hand-wringing airlines face over fuel costs as they struggle to survive in the wake of oil costing close to \$120 a barrel.

Two pilot bulletins were cited in a report by the inspector general of the Department of Transportation, or DOT. In a February 2007 bulletin, the airline expressed a "strong desire to reduce" fuel stops by pilots of 757 jetliners facing strong headwinds on trans-Atlantic routes to Newark.

In an October bulletin, the airline also tried to persuade pilots to avoid carrying extra fuel when it was not warranted, according to the report. "This bulletin further stated that adding fuel indiscriminately without critical thinking ultimately reduces profit sharing and possibly pension funding," the report said.

The bulletins "might put pressure on pilots to either not stop for fuel when needed or to carry insufficient amounts of fuel," DOT Inspector General Calvin Scovel III said in the report.

Continental Airlines said it followed all Federal Aviation Administration rules on carrying fuel and none of the flights studied by the DOT had less than a 45-minute reserve on board when they landed. An FAA spokesman said yesterday the agency found no violations related to fuel at Newark Liberty.

"Safety is our highest priority, and we agree with the recent DOT report that safety was not compromised in any of the situations they evaluated," Continental spokesman Dave Messing said yesterday. "Continental uses FAA-approved flight planning systems to ensure every flight has more than enough fuel to reach its destination, plus a significant reserve."

He said flights can stop for extra fuel en route if necessary. "The amount of fuel on every flight is determined by FAA-approved procedures, not the informational bulletins," he said.

Airline officials told the DOT auditors the February 2007 bulletin was designed to outline various steps under way to improve flight performance during unexpected headwinds on trans-Atlantic flights.

"They explained that the October 2007 bulletin was drafted to draw attention to the fact that excessive levels of additional fuel are not necessarily safety enhancements," the report said.

All airlines are struggling with high fuel costs. Just this week, Delta Air Lines and Northwest Airlines, which are planning to merge, lost a combined \$10.5 billion during the first quarter and spent \$2.5 billion to fuel their planes, up from \$1.6 billion a year ago, a 56 percent increase.

Air carriers use complex models to determine how much fuel to carry for a particular route, said Raphael Bejar, chief executive of Airsavings, a Paris-based airline efficiency consulting group.

When planes carry extra fuel, they also carry extra weight, which contributes to higher costs, he said.

"Ideally, each flight would carry exactly enough fuel to reach its destination, and no more," he said. "In reality, however, our outdated air-traffic control system cannot handle the volume of flights at most airports, resulting in delays. These delays can stack airplanes up in queues, circling and burning fuel as they wait."

The inspector general's report was contained in an April 9 letter to U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.), who asked federal officials to look into whether planes were arriving at Newark with low fuel. Lautenberg has said in response to the report "no airline company should force a pilot to choose between their pension and public safety." He declined to comment yesterday.

A spokeswoman for Continental's pilots union also declined to comment.

