Dear Mr. [Name],

The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is committed to protecting the safety and health of passengers, cabin crews and flight crews on our nation’s airlines. Studies have indicated that cabin air is as good as or better than the air found in offices and homes. The FAA believes that the cabin environment in the vast majority of commercial flights is safe. However, we are concerned that if certain mechanical failures occur, the cabin environment may contain contaminants.

Airlines are required to report fume events to the FAA (Federal Aviation Regulation (FAR) 121.703 and 121.705). These events are rare. From 1990-2010, there were approx. 900 fume events reported to the FAA out of millions of flights. FAA regulations require that airplanes be designed to provide the equivalent of at least 0.55 pounds of fresh air per minute per occupant, a ventilation rate that is consistent with other public environments.

All of today’s large transport category airplane ventilation systems provide a mix of fresh air/engine bleed and recirculated airflow. The mix is approximately 50% but usually varies depending upon the flight altitude and power settings. Airlines have the added benefit of flying at altitudes above the air pollution that is circulated into the spaces on the ground that we occupy on a daily basis. Most of the U.S. commercial airplanes use High Efficiency Particulate (HEPA) filters which remove 99.97% of particulate material. The low relative humidity in an airplane cabin may cause passengers to perceive the air quality as poor. However, lower humidity protects wiring and electronics and helps to prohibit bacterial and fungal growth.

Regardless of the information above, if you or anyone else believes contaminated cabin air is causing incapacitation and depression it should be reported to the appropriate authorities. Incidents of this nature must be appropriately investigated and mitigation strategies, if warranted, must be developed.

The Office of Aerospace Medicine does not have the manning, funding or expertise to investigate occupational health and safety issues in the cabin environment. Flight attendants and cabin crew in the performance of their duties are now covered by Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). The responsibility for flight crew occupational health and safety issues reside with FAA’s Flight Standards Service (AFS-220, Air Carrier Operations, Aviation Safety and Health Program manager). I encourage you to share your concerns with the appropriate authorities.
Thank you for your interest in protecting the safety and health of passengers, cabin crews and flight crews on our nation’s airlines.

Sincerely,

James R. Fraser
Federal Air Surgeon