THE SCOOP ON CABIN AIR QUALITY:
What did the National Academy of Sciences committee have to say?

In April, 2000, Congress passed a bill that required the FAA to fund a National Academy of Sciences (NAS) committee to complete a one-year review of aircraft cabin air quality (Public Law 106-181).

In October 2000, the NAS announced that "a committee will be convened to assess air quality conditions, associated health effects, and contributing factors in passenger cabins of commercial aircraft." The NAS had already selected 14 people with expertise in various related subjects, and had scheduled a public meeting in January 2001 where "interested parties" could provide insight and data.

At that first and only public meeting in January 2001, AFA (among others) presented an overview of the problems with cabin air quality, and submitted a written report that provided more detail. AFA's written report described a number of concerns including: (1) no attention paid by the FAA to cabin air quality; (2) no requirement for the airlines and FAA to collect data; (3) no minimum ventilation standard; (4) effectively no controls to prevent contamination of the air supply; (5) an outdated and possibly inadequate standard for oxygen levels in the cabin; and (6) pesticide exposure on selected routes. AFA also responded to the NAS' requests for follow-up information throughout the year and submitted any and all hot new information for review.

On 6 December 2001, the Committee released their 246-page report titled "The Airliner Cabin Environment and the Health of Passengers and Crew" published by the National Research Council. (The report is available at http://www.nap.edu/catalog/10238.html by clicking on the "open book/searchable" icon.) The running theme was "inadequate data", and many of the recommendations were a rehash of the 1986 report that the FAA had ignored. However, there were some key conclusions:

- The Committee was critical over the FAA's inaction regarding the recommendations of a similar NAS committee in 1986 (e.g. "establish a health program to monitor health effects of cabin crew", "implement a data-collection program that measures airflow and contamination in aircraft cabins", etc.); (pp. 18-19)

- The Committee called for a review of the current cabin altitude limit (this dictates the oxygen level in the cabin) and noted that it may be outdated, expressing concern in particular for infants and people with heart disease, lung disease, or anemia; (pp. 139-43)

- The Committee recommended that the FAA continuously monitor carbon monoxide (a chemical that robs your body of oxygen and can cause debilitating symptoms ) in the air supply; and (p.8)

- The Committee acknowledged that some of the pesticide sprays may contain a chemical that inhibits the very enzyme in the body that would otherwise break the pesticide down, and called for more research on the pesticide exposures on aircraft (p. 155).

Perhaps most importantly, the Committee recommended that Congress designate a lead federal agency and sufficient cash to direct a research program to answer the outstanding questions. Although we would have liked to see conclusions with more "teeth", AFA supported the Committee's recommendations. Our job is to make sure that another 15 years doesn't pass while the FAA continues to ignore this problem. Let's make sure that we are not stuck with another conclusion of "inadequate data" in 2016.  

– Association of Flight Attendants, AFL-CIO