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INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Pilot Grounded for Marijuana

By Alexandra Odynova

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This is not what "getting high" is supposed to mean in aviation.

A Moscow-bound jet with 192 passengers on board was grounded in the Far Eastern city of Magadan because the captain and a female flight attendant smoked marijuana before takeoff, air transportation officials said Tuesday.

The two crew members failed to pass a pre-flight medical check, with the results "raising doctors' concerns," said Alexander Bugakov, head of the regional branch of the Federal Air Transportation Agency.

"Both had a high pulse rate and high blood pressure, as well as a slowed reaction time," Bugakov said in comments carried by RIA-Novosti.

The whole crew was suspended, and the plane, Yakutia Airlines Flight 758, departed 12 hours later with a replacement crew.

The incident took place on Oct. 21 but was only reported this week when medical tests were wrapped up, confirming that the unidentified pilot and flight attendant were on drugs at the time, Bugakov said.

A drug test of the co-pilot has proved negative so far, but his blood test is not finished, he added. He did not elaborate on the rest of the crew.

The headquarters for Yakutia Airlines, located in Yakutia, six time zones ahead of Moscow, could not be reached for comment Tuesday afternoon, when the news broke.

A spokeswoman for the airline's Moscow office denied the story when reached by telephone, saying "the test results were wrong." She declined to elaborate.

The two crew members remain suspended from work, and the Federal Air Transportation Agency has handed the case over to the Magadan region's transportation prosecutors, who are to decide on possible penalties. Flight safety violations carry a sentence of up to three years in prison.

This is not the first drug incident involving Yakutia-based air crews. Last month, a pilot with an unidentified Sakha airline was caught in the act of smuggling synthetic cannabis into the cabin. He admitted to have regularly smoked the drug before flights and selling it to his friends, something he said his dealer had pressured him into doing, RIA-Novosti reported.

An even odder story took place on a Yakutia Airlines flight in May, when an unidentified business-class passenger, aided by the deputy director of the airport in the Far Eastern city of Blagoveshchensk, smuggled aboard a Moscow-bound plane two beehives to be handed over to a bee enthusiast in the capital.

The bees got out of the hives midair, but flight attendants managed to seal them in a wardrobe with some tape. No injuries or repercussions have been reported.

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