Opening address by the President of the Council of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), Mr. Roberto Kobeh González, to the Fatigue Risk Management Systems (FRMS) Symposium

(Montréal, 30 August 2011)

I personally wanted to welcome you to this Symposium, which I consider to be one of the most significant meetings hosted by ICAO in the field of aviation safety.

The question of pilot fatigue is a very complex one.

Over the past decades, fatigue has often been cited as a factor in aircraft accidents.

While the traditional approach for managing fatigue was through flight and duty time regulations, we came to realize that this prescriptive, "one size fits all" solution did not really consider all aspects of the question.

Studies have shown that fatigue has multiple sources and that it requires multi-layered defences to address the range of fatigue-related hazards associated with different operational contexts.

At the same time, a number of operators around the world were testing and adopting Fatigue Risk Management Systems (FRMS). They were motivated by evidence that FRMS could provide better safety outcomes than flight and duty regulations alone, and allow for greater operational flexibility. Results were positive overall.

The problem was the absence of a regulatory framework governing FRMS. There was no consistent and global understanding of what was meant by FRMS; how it should be implemented by operators, or how regulators could ensure effective oversight.

All that changed on 13 June 2011 when the Council of ICAO adopted international standards for FRMS. The new standards become applicable on 15 December 2011 and are supplemented with two supporting guidance documents, one for regulators and another for operators.

The package of standards and guidance material is the fruit of the work undertaken by the FRMS Task Force – comprised of regulators, operators, scientists, members of the medical profession and industry representatives from all over the world.

The scientific component is crucial. It makes it possible to consider fatigue risks whatever their source, whether sleep-related, circadian-related or task-related, through a dynamic, data-driven and systematic approach.

The ultimate goal is to ensure that a satisfactory level of operational performance and safety is maintained in both normal and abnormal situations.

I want to single out here the FRMS implementation guide for operators, jointly produced by ICAO, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) and the International Federation of Air Line Pilots' Associations (IFALPA). This is a first for ICAO. The fact that regulators, airlines and pilots came together and agreed on this document ensures that all of the technical, operational and economic issues were considered.

This truly interdisciplinary nature of the team is our best guarantee that the documentation produced is as comprehensive and reliable as can be.

I am certain that the standards and guidance material together provide the clarity and direction that will allow States to take full advantage of the safety and operational benefits afforded by FRMS. As important from ICAO's perspective, the new standards will promote the uniform implementation of the systems and will lay the basis for an effective oversight infrastructure.

I must emphasize that the standards do not impose FRMS upon States. The intent is to assist States that decide to go ahead with FRMS. Flight and duty time limitations remain mandatory for all States.

The difference is that with FRMS, variations to the prescriptive flight and duty time limitations are identified by operators and continually evaluated and updated in response to their own risk assessments and the data collected. Obviously, these "self-identified" limits are still subject to regulatory approval.

It is up to the regulator to assess whether the risk assessments, mitigations and the data collected are appropriate, and that the flight and duty time limitations identified are reasonable responses as evidenced in safety performance indicators.

So, having said all of this, you might wonder what this Symposium is all about.

There are two aspects to our meeting this week. The first is to provide an in-depth explanation of the new standards and guidance material, and to answer any questions you might have. This is essential to gaining your support in the implementation of FRMS on a global scale.

The second dimension of this meeting is to solicit your views.

Let me explain. We are convinced that the guidance material is ready for implementation. It was developed through a rigorous, systematic and transparent process, with all stakeholders concerned.

We also recognize the fact that fatigue risk management is a dynamic issue. There are a number of ongoing technological, scientific and medical developments that will impact both the implementation of the standards and the evolution of the guidance material.

We would like to tap your opinions and suggestions on a regular basis to make sure that we consistently address all of the complexities of fatigue risk management. We want our FRMS guidance material to evolve along with your experiences, to keep it operationally relevant.

In fact, the standards themselves make mandatory the continuous improvement of FRMS.

We want to foster a permanent dialogue among all stakeholders and this dialogue starts this week, right now, at the Symposium.

We want to do this in a totally transparent and open manner. I want you to feel comfortable in raising any question that will help us all in moving ahead with FRMS.

We have to make sure that when we leave this Symposium, we will have a common understanding as to the nature of FRMS, its challenges and benefits, and how we can best apply it, either as an operator or a regulator.

It is by working together that we achieve the best results.

Last May, ICAO hosted the first Global Runway Safety Symposium (GRSS). It was a tremendous success in terms of generating a clear understanding on the roles and responsibilities of each of the partners in reducing and working towards eliminating runway-related accidents. Here also, the multidisciplinary approach was identified as the only option for coming to grips with a complex set of operational and human factor issues.

That is the kind of consensus and commitment we are seeking from this Symposium and I thank you all in advance for your commitment to making this event another milestone in our collective drive to improving aviation safety worldwide.