

Federal Liberals, NDP, accuse transport minister of inaction over float planes

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By Ian Bailey, Globe and Mail

Vancouver - The federal transport minister says he has heard and heeded public concern about float plane safety in light of a weekend crash on the west coast of Vancouver Island that left four dead.

John Baird, in an interview from Ottawa Tuesday, also said he has flown in B.C. floatplanes a number of times, and has faith in their safety.

"I've had a good experience," said Mr. Baird. "I fly them myself. I have taken them a half dozen times between Vancouver and Victoria, and I have felt very safe using them."

But he said he was mindful of wider unease. "I certainly appreciate that there's a significant amount of concern in the province of British Columbia, and I share that concern, and I am prepared to re-evaluate what we can do to do a better job," Mr. Baird said.

"I think what the public expects is that we learn from experiences and not be afraid to evaluate our progress."

But many observers have said the federal government has failed to heed reports and recommendations on float-plane safety in recent years, including orders to mandate the wearing life vests.

Asked why anyone should believe the department's commitments now, Mr. Baird said "We will be judged not by talk, but by action. I think, at the same time, many people feel passionately about life vests being mandatory all the time. Others feel equally passionate that that would be a bad idea. So naturally, we're going to have to make a decision. One group of people won't be satisfied with the response, and I'll respect that, but we want to take every reasonable measure that's in the public interest. It won't necessarily be universally supported, but that's not unlike any decision government makes."

Mr. Baird said, in light of public concerns, he wants to be satisfied that all reasonable measures are being taken to ensure there's public safety and that his department is doing a "decent job" with its relevant responsibilities.

Joe Volpe, the Liberal opposition transportation critic, dismissed the minister's concern as "more rhetoric," noting there have been long-running concerns about floatplane safety, but no notable action by Mr. Baird's department.

"He's had recommendations by the Transport Safety Board before him, specifically two that are very important and that is the need for escape hatches on floatplanes and that all passengers wear life jackets," he said.

"There you are out in B.C. and you know, better than I or anybody else that these planes are an important – in fact essential source – of transportation in B.C. and it verges on the criminally negligent on the part of the minister not to have acted on recommendations that have been before him repeatedly. So now he's talking about maybe he'll investigate this and that, and involve anybody, but there's nothing actionable," Mr. Volpe said.

"My heart goes out to the families of the people who suffered the latest tragedy, but some of these things – some of them – can be avoided if we just follow the advice given to us by the boards that are there to study, to make recommendations."

Mr. Baird should have acted more forcefully after the Saturna Island crash, he said. "It's taken this second tragedy to start moving. I just wonder how serious he is."

Dennis Bevington, the NDP transport critic, said the industry needs more oversight due to the accident rate with small aircraft.

"I think the department should have moved more quickly to improve the safety of passengers on the aircraft when they are going into the water," he said.

On Monday, Mr. Baird ordered a review into float plane safety, two days after the crash of a single-engine Cessna at the First Nations community of Ahousat, not far from Tofino. The Transportation Safety Board has launched a probe, but there are no immediate answers on the cause of the crash.

On Saturday, the plane inexplicably dived into the ocean, killing three passengers and the pilot. The remains of the passengers and pilot have been removed from the wreckage, which is en route to the Lower Mainland for further analysis.

The accident came six months to the day after a crash at Saturna Island killed six people.

Measures announced by the minister this week include a review of potential safeguards to improve floatplane safety, and a review of innovations such as pop-out windows and the mandatory wearing of safety vests to improve escape options from submerged float planes. Mr. Baird is also planning an updated float plane safety awareness campaign for passengers and commercial operators that is to start this month.