

STATEMENT OF MARION C. BLAKEY, CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD, BEFORE THE U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION, ON HER NOMINATION TO BE ADMINISTRATOR OF THE FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION.

September 3, 2002

Mr. Chairman, Senator McCain, and distinguished members of the Committee:

It is truly an honor to appear before you today as President Bush's nominee for Administrator of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Thank you for holding this hearing so promptly. I know your schedules are full, and the Senate has a packed agenda, so I will keep my opening remarks brief and allow as much time as possible for questions.

Mr. Chairman, I know the President and Secretary Mineta share this Committee's concern that there be strong leadership at the FAA. Indeed, this is a critical time for our Nation's aviation industry. For this reason, the FAA's important work in ensuring aviation safety, improving the nation's air traffic control system, and meeting aviation capacity challenges must continue without interruption or delay. Should the Senate honor me with confirmation, I will work hard to ensure a smooth transition and a strong management team at the FAA.

At this time I want to acknowledge the exceptional leadership provided by the President, Secretary Mineta, and Administrator Garvey, especially in the wake of the September 11th tragedies. Not only have they strengthened the safety and security of our country, but they have also worked hard to help our aviation industry rebound. Should I be confirmed, I intend to advance their critical work by making sure that the United States' aviation system is the safest, most secure, and most efficient air transportation system in the world.

It should come as no surprise that I emphasize safety. As you know, at an earlier point I headed the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, and now I am Chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). I want to take this opportunity to thank the Committee for all its support of the NTSB and its employees. Each and every day, the men and women of the Safety Board strive to protect and advance public safety in all modes of transportation. They are an exceptional group of professionals, and I can honestly say that nothing has been more rewarding to me than working with them to strengthen the safety of our transportation system.

If confirmed I will be tasked with assessing and implementing many of the recommendations that the NTSB has issued to the FAA, and I will no doubt find myself responding to letters I've written. Taking action in many cases will be challenging, but I intend to follow through on the NTSB's recommendations vigorously. As I looked back through our records, I saw letters where former FAA Administrator Don Engen was also being tasked by himself and - - if he were still with us - - I'm sure he could offer me

sound advice.

As Chairman of the NTSB, I have had the opportunity to work closely with the FAA, with industry leaders, airport officials, citizen groups, transportation labor leaders, as well as with Members of Congress on many major aviation safety issues. I have also seen first-hand the importance of cooperation and partnership between the private and public sectors in advancing safety. Among Jane Garvey's many notable achievements, one of her key legacies is a strong system of consensus building between the public and private sectors. If confirmed, I intend to support and build on this approach to meet the agency's current and future challenges through partnerships with the aviation community - - including the flying public, the manufacturers, the airlines, the general aviation community and transportation labor leaders.

What are these challenges? Let me briefly discuss what I believe are just a few of the major challenges confronting the FAA.

It is fortuitous that this hearing should take place during the same week the Senate is considering landmark legislation to establish the Department of Homeland Security, which would include the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) as one of its core components. The creation of this new department highlights one of the major challenges currently facing the FAA - - how best to maintain and increase the focus on aviation safety in a post 9-11 environment in which security concerns are paramount. As I said, I believe cooperation is essential. The FAA must work closely with TSA to maximize safety and security while allowing the system to operate effectively. I know this is a priority for Secretary Mineta, and it will be a priority for me, should I be confirmed.

Improving security while ensuring that the world's safest skies become even safer is a challenge. By implementing NTSB safety recommendations, developing innovative programs, and working with the aviation industry, the new Administrator can help further reduce the nation's accident rate.

One important way to drive down the nation's accident rate is to expand our understanding of the human factor - - the single largest contributor to aviation accidents. In part, we can do this by collecting and analyzing as much information as possible. The FAA's Flight Operational Quality Assurance Program (FOQA) will play an important role in accomplishing this goal. Twelve airlines currently participate in the FOQA program, which enables voluntary reporting of digital flight data from airline operations. This information is then analyzed to identify adverse safety trends for proactive accident prevention. I believe that FOQA - - and programs like it - - will play a significant role in reducing the nation's accident rate.

The new Administrator will also be confronted with maximizing the aviation system's efficiency in order to accommodate anticipated increases in traffic. Meeting this challenge will involve both continuing to modernize the system as well as developing improved utilization of the nation's airspace. Before September 11th, the FAA predicted considerable growth in the aviation industry. Although the industry is currently experiencing a slowdown, many experts predict that the industry will soon return to pre-September 11th levels. This increase will intensify safety concerns as well as capacity pressures. The FAA has utilized the tools provided by Congress, including procurement reform, to sustain, renew, and

expand the capabilities of the air traffic control system. Some of the tools in place are providing system users with tangible benefits, such as more direct routing and reduced diversions in inclement weather. But system modernization is a continuous process, and the pressure to develop and implement new tools must be maintained in order to meet tomorrow's demands.

Until recently, the use of our airspace remained largely unchanged while other components of the aviation system were improved significantly. Maximizing the nation's airspace efficiency is critical to meeting future capacity demands. I think the FAA's Operational Evolution Plan (OEP) - - a comprehensive 10-year plan that provides an understanding of how agency resources will enable the agency to achieve specified goals - - is an excellent management tool. This plan, which includes airspace redesign, airport improvements, and system modernization, is only a blueprint. Executing the plan is critical and will require the combined efforts of federal, state, and local government and system users.

Finally, the staffing and internal organization of the FAA requires attention. The search for a Chief Operating Officer (COO) continues. Although filling the position won't be easy - - it must remain a top priority. As you know, an Air Traffic Organization (ATO) is in the process of being created. Important safety and efficiency initiatives, such as performance metrics and cost accounting must be expanded and implemented. Based on my experience at NHTSA, at the NTSB, and in the private sector, I know that in order to accomplish an organization's mission you have to employ the best people, give them the best tools, and support them with appropriate resources. If this is done correctly, then true accountability for performance can be achieved.

Next year, this Committee will consider the reauthorization of the FAA's programs. It will be a time to assess the agency's performance, set priorities, and support its missions with the necessary funding. It will also be important to have extensive input and feedback from the aviation community on how best to build on and further improve the aviation system's safety record. If confirmed as Administrator, I will work closely with the Committee to help ensure that the FAA's reauthorization process provides a platform to take our system to a new peak of safety and efficiency.

Mr. Chairman, I am honored by the trust the President has placed in me as his nominee. If confirmed, I pledge to do my utmost to guide the FAA well through the many challenges that lie ahead. I would like to thank this Committee again for its swift consideration of my nomination, and I look forward to a close working relationship should the Senate act favorably. I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.