



AIRCRAFT OWNERS AND PILOTS ASSOCIATION

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**Statement of Tom George
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Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association

Before the

**COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND
TRANSPORTATION
U.S. SENATE**

The Honorable Ted Stevens, Chairman
The Honorable Daniel K. Inouye, Ranking Member

Concerning

**Alaska Aviation Infrastructure and Funding Challenges –
Meeting Future Safety, Capital, and Technological Needs**

July 5, 2006

Good morning. Thank you for the invitation to be here today to discuss aviation issues in Alaska. My name is Tom George, and I serve as the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association's (AOPA) Regional Representative for Alaska. AOPA represents more than 408,000 pilots and aircraft owners – more than two-thirds of all active pilots in the United States, including over 4,200 members in Alaska.

Alaska, more than any other state, relies on general aviation as a major component of its transportation system. That is why some of the aviation funding proposals being debated back in Washington, D.C. would have a profound negative impact on Alaska's residents. I'd like to share AOPA's concerns in regards to this issue, highlight the initiatives that are improving aviation safety in the state, and outline the areas needing more attention.

Protect the National Aviation System – Preserving the World's Safest, Most Efficient Aviation System

For the past year, debate over how to fund the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and its associated programs has been underway. The airlines and the FAA are advocating to replace aviation taxes with a user fee system, including taking the air traffic control system out from under the management oversight and budgetary control of the Congress. But many of us in Alaska, are questioning why Washington would totally change the effective mechanism that currently funds the safest, most efficient aviation system in the world? Without Congress acting as the FAA's Board of Directors, Alaska's needs will likely be shortchanged.

The FAA claims the Aviation Trust Fund is insufficient and provides funding in a manner that is unpredictable. But the fact of the matter is, with ticket prices and the number of passengers increasing, more money is going into the trust fund than ever. Alaska is so reliant on aviation and it plays such an important role in the economic backbone of the state, isn't it appropriate that 25 percent of the FAA's costs be funded by the general taxpayers? Everyone in the state benefits from the aviation system, whether or not they actually fly. Everyday deliveries of goods and services, medical services and supplies, mail delivery and other everyday needs are all dependent on a viable air transportation system.

Airport Funding - Essential to Alaska's Transportation System

Congress has been particularly mindful of Alaska's reliance on aviation transportation through its strong support of the Airport Improvement Program (AIP). AIP grants provide much needed funding for airport development projects such as airfield capital improvements and repairs, navigational aids, airfield lighting, land acquisition, and planning studies.

But as this Committee is well aware, the Administration's request for this vital program has many AOPA members, especially those of us in Alaska, alarmed. The President's FY07 budget proposes to fund AIP at \$2.7 billion - nearly a billion dollars less than its authorized level.

And the story gets worse. The current authorizing statute for AIP contains several special rules that are triggered only when AIP is funded at \$3.2 billion or higher. One of those special rules creates a direct entitlement program for general aviation airports. While the \$150,000 annual nonprimary airport grant may not sound like much money in Washington, D.C., it adds up for Alaska's aviation system. This year, under the nonprimary entitlement program, 159 Alaskan airports are entitled to \$22,938,653. Another rule triggered by this funding level doubles the amount of special funding Alaska receives, known as the "Supplemental Apportionment for Alaska." This year, Alaska will receive \$21,345,114 through this supplemental apportionment.

If AIP is funded below \$3.2 billion, Alaska will lose over \$23 million in AIP funding – making it one of the top five states most severely impacted by this cut. Aviation is too important to Alaska to jeopardize our economy by allowing these cuts to be enacted.

Fortunately, the House of Representatives rejected this shortsighted proposal, and voted to fund AIP at its authorized level of \$3.7 billion last month. The stakes are high for Alaska's pilots, and this is one of AOPA's top priorities for 2006 – we urge you to fund the Airport Improvement Program at \$3.7 billion.

Improving Safety - Leading the Way for Aviation Technology with Capstone Program

Another top priority is fully realizing the safety benefits from the Capstone Program. Documented studies show a 47 percent reduction in accidents for general aviation aircraft using this new technology here in Alaska. The FAA partnered with the aviation community in Southwest Alaska to operationally demonstrate Automatic Direct Broadcast-Surveillance or ADS-B. General aviation pilots in Alaska have proven its viability, and it is one of the building blocks of the FAA's Next Generation Air Transportation System. This new data link technology provides a greater situational awareness to pilots and air traffic control, increasing safety in the sky and for the general public on the ground.

A second phase of the program, still in deployment, is enhancing the Global Positioning Satellite System (GPS) with the Wide Area Augmentation System (WAAS) in Southeast Alaska. This will provide customized air traffic routes and approaches to better navigate the fjord-like terrain of the region. Since it does not need ground based navigation stations, these routes are easily adapted to the sea-level channels, and provide much lower minimum enroute altitudes. This is especially important for general aviation aircraft that are unable to handle icing at higher elevations.

To put it simply, the Capstone Program is bringing Alaska up to par with the nation in terms of aviation infrastructure, and generating data to help develop the future of our nation's air traffic control system. These technologies have clearly shown the potential to increase aviation safety and access to rural Alaskan communities, many of which are still limited to daytime only visual operations (VFR). We strongly encourage the FAA to move forward aggressively to deploy the ground infrastructure necessary to provide statewide coverage for ADS-B and WAAS routes and approaches. For this program to continue its record of success in improving safety, the FAA should also support industry

efforts in Alaska to develop a financial assistance program to help aircraft owners voluntarily install the equipment needed to realize the full benefits of this program. Without affordable avionics Capstone and its associated nationwide implementation will be hampered, or fail to reach its full potential.

Weather Reporting Programs - Another Important Tool for Improving Safety

Very quickly, I'd like to mention two weather-reporting programs that are also enhancing aviation safety in Alaska. The FAA Weather Camera Program is rapidly becoming a valuable source of weather information to general and commercial aviation pilots. Observations are recorded every ten minutes, uploaded onto the Internet, and made available to the public. This allows pilots to look at weather conditions firsthand before making operational decisions, overcoming many of the shortcomings of the unattended automated weather stations.

The National Weather Service's Alaska aviation weather Web site is filling a vital role in delivering weather products, often in graphic form, directly to pilots. The same site provides access to the most current weather satellite and NextRad weather data. Ironically, it is the only way that pilots can graphically view the pilot reports collected by the FAA. These observations, made by the pilots as they fly, bridge the huge gaps in data between ground reporting stations. AOPA also encourages the National Weather Service to continue the development of their Alaska aviation weather Web site.

Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) Must Be Implemented Carefully and Without Negative Impacts on General Aviation

One area needing much more attention from the FAA is the issue of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs). Potential UAV applications in Alaska include military training, fisheries monitoring, pipeline patrol, and forest fire mapping. Rugged terrain and severe weather conditions make the challenge of mixing UAVs with manned aircraft worse in Alaska. It's crucial to understand that aircraft are often funneled into narrow mountain passes or compressed under cloud layers, meaning that UAVs and manned aircraft will share limited airspace in close proximity to each other. While exciting technologically, it is important that UAVs don't become a hazard to the existing airspace users.

AOPA believes that 'temporary' flight restrictions (TFRs) for UAV operations are not appropriate and the FAA needs to fully explore the alternatives available to allow federal agencies to meet their operational needs without impacting general aviation. Alaska's dependence on aviation as a form of basic transportation magnifies the inconvenience of airspace restrictions into a fundamental question of access.

Military use of UAVs is also a concern, and the Army plans to use unmanned aircraft as part of their training for ground troops near Ft. Greely. Where other military UAVs primarily use existing restricted airspace, the Army has stated that it will not ask for restricted airspace for this facility. It is essential that general aviation not be excluded from additional airspace in this area.

AOPA recently surveyed its members on the issue of UAV operations. The overwhelming majority rejected the notion of flight restrictions, preferring that the FAA

certify unmanned aircraft for operations in the nation's airspace. The FAA must develop standards to certify UAVs to the same level of safety as piloted aircraft. Failure to do so could further isolate Alaskan residents from the basic necessities needed to survive. In addition, pilots have safety concerns that must be addressed by the FAA before UAV operations should be considered. Some of these are technical and some regulatory including:

- The inability of UAVs to see and avoid manned aircraft;
- The inability of UAVs to immediately respond to ATC instructions;
- The absence of testing and demonstrations that UAVs can operate safely in the same airspace as manned aircraft; and
- The need to certify UAVs to the same level of safety as manned aircraft.

Military Airspace - Expansion Requires the DOD to Share More Information with Pilots

The military shares vast amounts of airspace with civil aviation users in Alaska in the form of Military Operations Areas (MOAs). These MOA's are used for military training activities, both on a routine basis and for major flying exercises. The civil community has cooperated with the military in Alaska to develop these areas, respectful of both civil and military needs. A major factor contributing to this success is a service supported by the military called the Special Use Airspace Information Service (SUAIS). This service, formally defined in a 1997 Record of Decision that established the airspace complex, allows civil users to determine the current and near-term status of the MOAs and restricted areas, greatly improving the situational awareness and therefore aviation safety for all users of the airspace. This system may need to be expanded to meet the growing needs of the Air Force and Army as they ramp up their training activities in Alaska.

Congress Should Prevent Premature Decommissioning of LORAN

General aviation pilots heavily rely on the Global Positioning System (GPS) for electronic navigation. In the case of unexpected GPS outages, pilots generally rely on ground based navigation aids such as Very High Frequency Omni Range (VOR). This is a suitable solution for now. However, VOR is generally believed to be an unsuitable backup for advanced GPS positioning and timing applications, such as ADS-B. Except for VOR, virtually all backup options are difficult for general aviation pilots to utilize, due to excessive cost or technological immaturity.

Some believe that the Long Range Navigation system (LORAN) is a viable GPS backup for aviation users. Unfortunately, the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) U.S. Coast Guard has proposed to decommission LORAN as early as this September. Given the apparent need for an affordable, robust GPS backup that has similar performance, and supports the positioning and timing needs of aviation, the decommissioning of LORAN by the DHS is premature. Once gone, LORAN will no longer be a backup option, and any other suitable alternative would likely be more costly, take longer to implement, and would be the financial responsibility of the FAA exclusively. Congress should prevent LORAN decommissioning until the FAA can conclusively validate LORAN performance, and verify LORAN is a suitable backup to

GPS. The FAA should also provide Congress with an assessment of the viability of affordable LORAN receivers that can be certified for general aviation. AOPA firmly believes that consultation with aviation users should be conducted before decommissioning LORAN.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to bring several of these important issues that affect AOPA members to your attention. Under your leadership, field hearings in Alaska have become an annual event that serves to highlight our state's unique environment to your colleagues. As you well know, those of us that call Alaska home share a passion - one that is not easily understood by those in the lower 48 – for this place, so we truly appreciate your desire to represent us in the fervent manner that reflects who we are.