

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Commerce Nomination Hearing of Bryan Bedford to be Administrator of the Federal Aviation Administration

June 11, 2025

Sen. Cantwell Opening Remarks

[VIDEO]

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. And congratulations on your nomination, Mr. Bedford. Welcome to your family and their willingness to help in this larger effort.

Before I begin, I want to recognize the members of families who are here from the Colgan Flight 3407, they have been a constant source of aviation safety focus. And I want to recognize Tim and Sheri Lilley, who lost their son in the January...DCA collision. Thank you for being here and your focus on safety.

It's important that we have an FAA Administrator who strengthens our aviation standards to honor the families who have lost loved ones in these tragic accidents. The position is one with enormous responsibility. Every day the FAA manages around 45,000 flights, ensuring the safety of over 2.9 million commercial airline passengers.

The agency's fundamental mission is safety, ensuring the United States maintains the world's safety aviation system. The tragic mid-air collision in January between the Army Black Hawk helicopter and American Airlines Flight 5342 took the lives of 67 people, and is a stark reminder what happens when the system fails.

These failures underscore why we must have an Administrator who is an unwavering champion for safety, who strengthens safety standards, rather than seeking a way around them. Your nomination does not come in a vacuum, so the Committee has obviously heard from other Trump administration officials, and we are concerned about light touch approaches in general.

I can assure you that we need a hands-on approach, not a hands-off approach. We don't need someone changing the standards just because they think they can lower costs. As multiple high profile aviation incidents have shown us that prioritizing efficiency over safety leads to higher costs, instead of doing the right thing the first time.

So simply put, we need an Administrator, that my colleague and I agree on, helps us get to the gold standard in the United States of America. Someone who's not looking for shortcuts, but is looking to restore this for the U.S.

Congress passed the FAA Reauthorization bill with overwhelming bipartisan support to strengthen safety, modernize our air traffic control system, and build a qualified workforce.

We required the FAA to mandate 25-hour cockpit voice recorders, overhaul helicopter air tour safety regulations, requiring foreign maintenance repair stations to meet the same safety standards that we have in the U.S., and the law authorized \$17 billion for critical air traffic control technology equipment upgrades.

Given...Secretary Duffy's plans to build off of that FAA law, I'm very interested in how you plan to implement that vision. While attention to upgrading our air traffic system is encouraging, recent outages at Newark made clear that the FAA needs an all-hands-on-deck approach.

We are experiencing the serious loss of talent at the FAA. So, I certainly don't agree with the administration's cutting of FAA officials. Senior FAA leaders are leaving, and the FAA has lost about three percent of its workforce.

I firmly believe in the next aviation mission, which is the thermoplastic composites that both commercial aviation [and space] will use, that will make production go from 40 planes a month to 100 planes a month. We need it for space, and we absolutely need it for national defense and security.

So, I hope that the FAA can fill both these roles of safety and the future of aviation implementation. I look forward to hearing how you can fulfill these missions, and we want to know what you're going to do to strengthen the oversight of safety, both here in the U.S. and internationally at ICAO. The United States needs to advocate for the highest safety standards on an international basis, as well.

You spent an entire career in the airline industry. So, we know you know the aviation business at Republic Airways.

I do have concerns about the long opposition to the FAA's 1500-hour rule, finalized in 2013. You said that the rule "does nothing to further the goal of increased flight safety." Since the 1500-hour rule and the reforms that took place, fatalities have been reduced by 99 percent in the last 11 years [before the DCA collision]. So, I'm sure I will ask you for the record what you think about the 1500-hour rule and what we need to do to continue the exemplary investment in aviation safety.

The DCA collision exposed multiple safety failures, including the Army Black Hawk helicopter not transmitting enhanced ADS-B Out technology, unsafe flight routes for mixed traffic [near] DCA, and a lack of FAA and Department of Defense coordination.

That's why I introduced, with my colleagues, Senator Duckworth, Klobuchar, Warnock, Kaine, Warner, and Markey, legislation to ensure that the FAA has an effective integrated agency-wide safety management system to prioritize the reviews of airports and high-volume traffic. So, I look forward to asking you about how you plan to strengthen this particular area of FAA oversight.

So, Congress has clearly prescribed a very proactive approach for the FAA oversight, not reactive. So, this is the path forward, a stronger, more effective FAA.

I look forward to discussing these issues with you, and again, congratulations on your nomination.

Q&A

[VIDEO]

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you. Mr. Bedford, we had a conversation in my office about SMS in general. And do you believe that the FAA should have a real SMS system for themselves?

Mr. Bedford: Well, thank you for the question Ranking Member Cantwell. Thank you for the time in your office and the substantive conversation that we had. And thank you sincerely for showing leadership last year, coming out to visit us at the LIFT Academy. So, thank you for all of that. I will tell you that SMS is truly the lifeblood. And I'm sure you know that it was in the Aviation Safety Act that we mandated SMS for all commercial part 121 carriers. So that became the standard, which I think moved the needle on aviation safety in a significant way.

Sen. Cantwell: Well, it has to be implemented. And we definitely have a general counsel who definitely shortchanged it in the first Trump administration, and I have a fear he's going to shortchange it in this one. So my point is, you and I talked about there's two different SMS systems within the FAA. Given the accidents that have happened with both the [737] MAX and this, I think it proves that both of those systems aren't really working. Is that, is it just your viewpoint? Is that your viewpoint? That there's something wrong with the SMS that the FAA is using today, if, if we've had these, these two horrific accidents, or actually three if you include both Max accidents?

Mr. Bedford: I think we are all aligned on this. Something's amiss. I think we believe that the SMS system at the FAA needs a radical overhaul. I think we can do it. Our arch enemy here is complacency. You know, not having SMS in a binder on a shelf somewhere, but actively, daily, utilizing SMS and safety risk management assessments as we're looking at change. Change itself is not bad. We shouldn't resist change and hide behind a shield...

Sen. Cantwell: So, you'll help enforce. I have so many safety questions.

Mr. Bedford: Go ahead, sorry.

Sen. Cantwell: So, you'll help enforce manufacturers to use SMS. You'll help get a better SMS system at the FAA?

Mr. Bedford: As we discussed, it's a key tool to actually doing the job right the first time.

Sen. Cantwell: Okay, 1500-hour rule. There's a lot of concerns because you worked for a company, you were part of a lobbying effort, you came here and tried to change this rule. What are you going to do in your term, a full five-year term, as my colleague is suggesting, that, you know, I'm all for consistency at the FAA, we got a big job here. What are you saying that you will do to recuse yourself from a 1500-hour rule [change] that you as Administrator could initiate? So, during your term, will you initiate such a rule [change]?

Mr. Bedford: Thank you for the question, Senator Cantwell. I'm sure I'm going to get that question multiple times today, and I'm looking forward to actually clarifying the record on that. But I can tell you the President's vision right now, and what we've discussed, is the urgent need to modernize the air traffic control system, fix the FAA staffing shortages, and redesign the NAS for emerging technologies and innovation. So that will be my uncompromising focus.

Sen. Cantwell: I get that, I get that, and I appreciate that, but people are going to want to know. Families who've lost loved ones because of the safety implementations that have taken place, they want to know whether you're going to lead any effort to change that rule while you're Administrator. So, you can think about it some more for the record, you can give us a firm, written answer, but I think a lot will be depending on that answer...

Mr. Bedford: I appreciate that.

Sen. Cantwell: ...because people you, you helped fund and lobbied for a change for it.

Mr. Bedford: Well, if we have time, I can respond to that now.

Sen. Cantwell: Yes, but can I ask you something else first, and then we could come back to that?

Mr. Bedford: Go ahead, of course.

Sen. Cantwell: A very important issue we also discussed in my office is this high C-band sale that my colleague and others are proposing as part of this bill, and last time we ran into a lot of interference on that. So, we have joint studies that say this is a safety issue. What is your view?

Mr. Bedford: Well, my view is I'm not informed enough to formulate an opinion. I can tell you from a past experience, we felt very rushed in terms of spectrum sales and rolling out the technology. So, I hope we've learned some lessons from the past and will be much more collaborative and coordinated before we simply execute a plan. We need to ensure that the aircraft are operated safely within our nation's airspace systems, especially Class B airspace, at congested airports.

Sen. Cantwell: What's going to happen if this goes into effect?

Mr. Bedford: Well, honestly, I, again, I don't know where the spectrum bands are, so I can't speak, you know, competently about the issue. I can tell you we're concerned.

Sen. Cantwell: Well we had a very different conversation in my office, and you told me that the last interference was a big problem, and you told me that this would be a big problem. So, I just, I need consistency, because it follows the 1500-hour thing. You can say now, 'I'm not going to do 1500 hours,' but if you get in there, and then you get pressured, and you do 1500-hour changes, it's a different story.

And on this in my office, you clearly said there were interference issues, it was a mess, and you definitely didn't want to have future altimeter problems. We can't have sale of spectrum and then have altimeter interruptions or problems. We need to work cohesively on testbedding these issues.

Mr. Bedford: I couldn't agree more.

Sen. Cantwell: Okay, so do you have concerns that that this is premature, to move this without that testbedding?

Mr. Bedford: The record is clear. We had significant challenges with the last spectrum rollout. We had interference with radio altimeters. We needed to invest in our aircraft with filters to make sure that they could operate safely. I said, for the record, that we should learn those lessons of the past and act more collaboratively rolling out. So I am advocating...

Sen. Cantwell: We're not acting collaboratively right now. I can tell you that. Okay, so I see my time has expired. I do want to clarify you are for us closing the ADS-B loopholes, right, and moving forward on ADB-S In and [ADB-S] Out as part of NextGen, the whole system. You're for moving forward?

Mr. Bedford: I am supportive of ADS-B In, and ADS-B In 'like' technologies that put more control in the cockpit alerting our pilots of traffic that's impending in their areas, yes. And that would be including requiring our military operators and airspace to also operate visibly.

Sen. Cantwell: And ADB-S Out too, just in the transmission, making sure they do both.

Mr. Bedford: [ADB-S] Out and TCAS, and making sure that our war fighters' equipment is also properly maintained and working on both TCAS and ADS-B Out.

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Sen. Cruz: I would note, Mr. Bedford, that Senator Cantwell asked a series of questions about spectrum auction. And Senator Cantwell has previously stated that this Committee spectrum pipeline language would require the FCC to auction at least 100 megahertz in the upper C-band, which is 3.98 to 4.2 gigahertz. That is true.

What is not true is the claim that this poses a risk to aviation safety. First, the language provides two years for an auction to occur, ample time especially since the FCC has already begun work on this band. And secondly, the bill requires auctioning less than half of the spectrum of the band, giving the FCC and industry significant flexibility to avoid any adverse impact on aviation.

The lower C-band, 3.7 to 3.98 gigahertz, which was auctioned a few years ago for 5G use, did prompt concerns about interference with radio altimeters. But despite this, there was no widespread disruptions or accidents. Mitigation efforts worked. That episode forced the FAA, the FCC, NTIA and DoD, and industry, to collaborate closely, and it worked. That coordination set a model for future spectrum decisions that is incorporated into this Committee's bill.

Transparency, urgency, mutual respect, and problem solving. Spectrum policy is not putting aviation safety at risk. On the contrary. The broader bill's FAA modernization funding will enhance it.

Sen. Cantwell: Can I say, Mr. Chairman, that you brought up serving five years. And it was shortly after this [5G] debacle that Mr. Dickson decided 'I have had enough.' And I think the fact that he tried to negotiate ...the first time this came through, and people couldn't negotiate, and people didn't negotiate. And the telcos just ran over the aviation sector and the White House tried to mitigate it, and Steve Dickson more or less threw up his hands. So, we've got to get this right. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.