

**Before the Aviation Operations, Safety, and Security Subcommittee
Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
United States Senate**

**Reinvesting in America's Small Airports and
Access to Rural Communities**

Statement by

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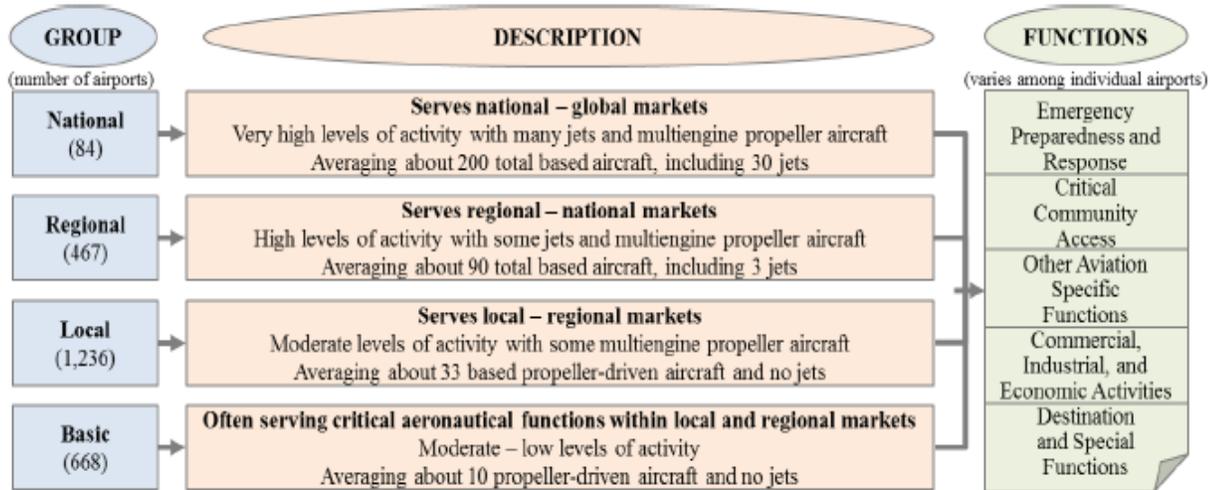
General Aviation and Airports in Rural America

The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA) represents more than 300,000 of America's pilots and aviation enthusiasts and we believe that nothing better represents the foundational spirit of freedom than taking to America's skies. And the most necessary element of the freedom to fly is America's network of airports. Local airports, many of which are in rural communities and are not served by commercial aviation, are economic engines that allow towns to tap into the 1.1 million jobs and \$219 billion in economic output that general aviation (GA) is responsible for in today's economy.

The national network of airports is made up of some 5,200 public-use community airports and only around ten percent of those airports have commercial service, meaning they rely on GA alone to connect the 170 million GA passengers every year and serve the needs of the medical and law enforcement communities as well as support everything from agriculture, fishing, and pest control to forestry and wildlife management. It all comes down to access and rural America relies on GA airports.

The following are the four categories of GA Airports according to the FAA and a map of the airports from the FAA 2012 ASSET Report.

Figure 2: General Aviation Airport Categories



Map of the General Aviation Airports in the Four Categories



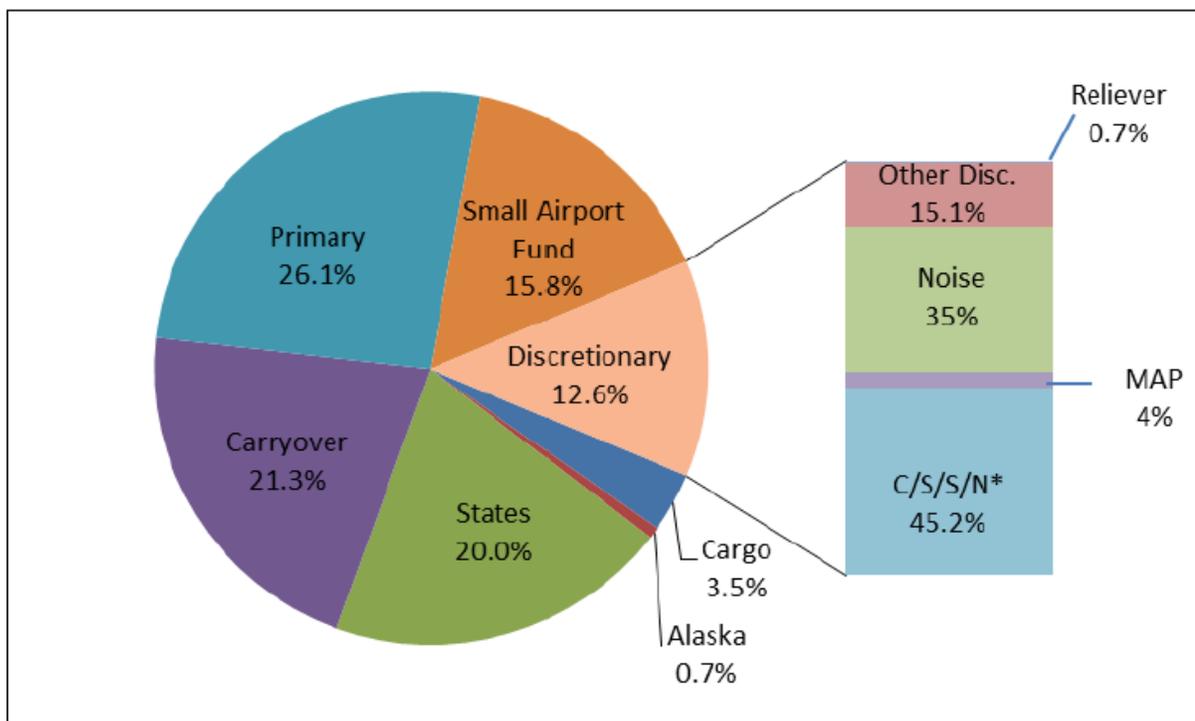
General Aviation Airport Funding

The Federal Aviation Administration's National Plan of Integrated Airport Systems (NPIAS) consists of 3,340 airports including 2,950 non-primary airports most of which do not have commercial service. Funding for these non-primary airports comes from Non-Primary Entitlement (NPE) grants under the Airport Improvement Program (AIP) to improve safety, capacity, and security or meet environmental concerns. The AIP does not receive any general fund revenue and instead is financed by a series of national airspace system fees including taxes on aviation fuels.

Under NPE, each non-primary airport receives \$150,000 per year for capital projects. An airport may "bank" their unspent NPE for up to four years for a potential total amount of \$600,000 in the fourth year. By the fifth year, the amount available to the airport returns to \$150,000. Considering the NPE is not indexed, the value of grants has been decreasing since inception of the program in 2001.

Many GA airports have had difficulty using their NPE funds for two reasons. First, the amount available in any given year is too low to complete needed projects. Second, often the cash strapped airport sponsors struggle to provide the ten percent local match requirement for a project. Also, NPE funds are limited to airside projects such as lighting, runways, and taxiways and cannot be used for other airport projects such as terminals or hangar construction.

When a non-primary airport does not use its entitlement in a fiscal year, the funds are returned to the FAA discretionary fund and spent on current year projects including at larger primary airports which benefit from this cycle. As a result, hundreds of millions of NPE dollars are not being spent on their intended purpose, to help small GA airports, mostly in rural America. Of the \$442 million in total NPE funds last year, 2016, \$329 million dollars were carried over to the discretionary fund. Between 2006 and 2016, more than \$2 billion in NPE funds have been carried over. AOPA would like to work with the Committee to ensure that NPE funds are being used as Congress intended and to protect the airport ecosystem for small communities across the United States.



Source: CRS Report titled “Reauthorization of the Federal Aviation Administration in the 115th Congress”, March 20, 2017.

Public-Private Partnerships

Certain airports have recognized the advantages of establishing public-private partnerships to meet the needs of the local aviation community and generate additional revenue. The result is a win-win -- businesses realize and capitalize on opportunities and the airport becomes more self-sustaining. However, many airports lack the resources to effectively market these opportunities to the private sector. The Metropolitan Airport Commission, which owns and operates seven airports in the Minneapolis area, has proven the concept and accomplished extensive hangar development at their GA airports relying solely on private capital.

Public-private partnerships can go a long way to help cash strapped local communities rebuild and reinvigorate their airports and increase economic output to the benefit of taxpayers and users of the airport.

There is significant demand for hangar development at airports across the country but in most cases their construction and refurbishment may not be financed by AIP grants. Many airports have long waiting lists for hangars and what hangars they have are often old and in need of repair.

AOPA would like to work with the Committee, the FAA, and industry to help airports take advantage of public-private partnership opportunities to increase traffic, expand facilities, and maximize revenue potential.

General Aviation Airports – Health, Safety, and Security

General aviation airports play a vital role in our national airspace system especially during emergencies. Professionals in law enforcement, national security, border security, and healthcare use GA airports, even where larger airports are available, because of accessibility and lower costs and congestion. As the FAA said in a 2012 report on GA airports, “It is faster, easier on the patient, and far less expensive to operate these lifesaving services from a general aviation airport.”

Figure 3: General Aviation Airports Serving Aeromedical Flights⁴



⁴ Metropolitan or Micropolitan Statistical Areas are geographic entities defined by the Office of Management and Budget for use by Federal statistical agencies in collecting, tabulating, and publishing Federal statistics.

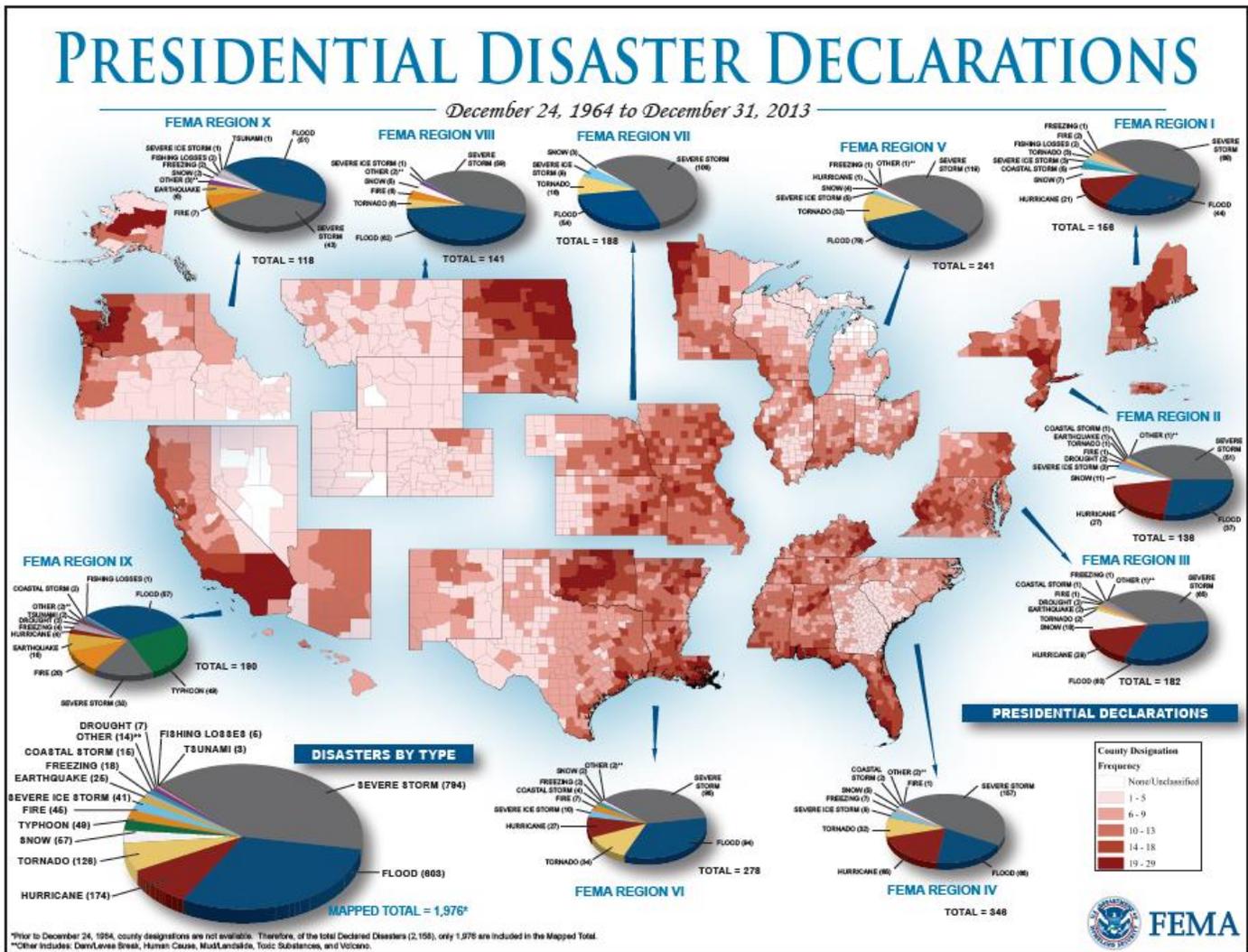
In natural disasters, including earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, and wildfires, the extensive system of GA airports provides a staging area to support relief and rescue efforts. For example, Eagle's Nest Airport in New Jersey became one of the only ways to quickly and efficiently deliver supplies to the area in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy.

Volunteers, not just professionals, use GA airports every day to provide services and care. Programs including the Civil Air Patrol, Pilots & Paws, Patient Airlift Services, Veterans Airlift Command to help transport wounded warriors, the Air Care Alliance, Disaster Airlift Response Teams, and many others help those in need connect with those who have a passion for aviation and giving back.

GA airports also serve as an emergency diversionary location. From passenger illness to deteriorating weather, there are times in all segments of aviation where an aircraft needs to land quickly, and a broad system of airports gives pilots better options in emergencies. For example, the U.S. Forest Service has designated certain GA airports as staging areas to fight fires. Using aircraft to fight large fires spread over a wide geographic area is often the safest and most cost-effective solution, saving property and lives.

As indicated by the FEMA chart below of Presidential Disaster Declarations from 1964 to 2013, every region of the U.S. has been impacted by some type of natural

disaster. Again, AOPA would like to work with the Committee to ensure that GA airports are available and prepared to assist in times of natural disasters.



Contract Towers

AOPA strongly supports the Contract Tower Program, which is one of the FAA's most effective public-private partnerships. The program provides essential air traffic services at 253 airports in 46 states, and handles approximately 28 percent of all air traffic control tower aircraft operations in the U.S. but only accounts for around 14 percent of FAA's overall budget allotted for tower operations. Federal contract towers operate together with FAA-staffed facilities throughout the country as part of a unified national air traffic control system that benefits and connects smaller airports and rural communities.

Contract towers have also produced a stellar safety record equal to or better than FAA-run control towers based on FAA audits and reviews by the Department of Transportation Inspector General, and the National Transportation Safety Board. In addition, numerous studies have validated what we in GA know to be true, that airports are economic engines for communities, and establishing an air traffic control tower drives even greater economic development and job creation. Maintaining funding for the contract tower program is vital to aviation safety and the economic viability of countless communities.

General Aviation Pilot Population

Whether individuals fly for business, personal reasons or intend to fly for a living one day, most pilots start out in general aviation. GA faces a number of very real challenges including rising costs of aircraft ownership and training as well as a burdensome regulatory environment and subsequently the U.S. pilot population has been declining for decades.

According to the FAA, in 1980 there were 827,071 active pilots. By 2015 that figure had fallen to 590,039—a nearly 30 percent decline. The FAA issued 50,458 private pilot certificates in 1980 and by 2015 that number was just 16,473—a 67 percent decline. Additionally, AOPA estimates there were almost 500,000 lapsed pilots under the age of 70 in 2015 and 70 to 80 percent of students who start flight training drop out without earning a pilot certificate. This drop in the number of pilots comes as demand and job opportunities are on the rise; the U.S. airline industry will need 95,000 new pilots between 2015 and 2034 according to a Boeing analysis.

AOPA is also committed to helping all pilots fly more safely which is why the AOPA Air Safety Institute has been producing free safety education programs for over 60 years. From groundbreaking online courses to popular live seminars and videos, ASI covers the spectrum of aviation safety education. AOPA is committed to safety and it is embedded in our organization's culture.

To reverse the decline in the pilot population, AOPA created the You Can Fly program to build a stronger, more vibrant, and more resilient pilot community. You Can Fly is based on extensive research and real-world experience and is made up of a series of initiatives to support flying clubs, encourage best practices in flight training, get lapsed pilots back in the air, bring AOPA's resources and expertise to pilot groups across the country, and invite high school students to learn more about careers in aviation and aerospace.

Congress, and more specifically this Committee, has already taken a big step to reduce costs and bureaucracy for pilots by passing third class medical reform legislation last year which was signed into law by President Obama. This was the biggest reform for pilots in recent history and this Committee work will have an enormous positive impact on GA for decades. The FAA's Regulatory Impact Analysis estimates that 327,324 pilots that have a valid FAA medical certificate may benefit from and utilize the improved regulations, now called BasicMed, that could save pilots over \$380 million from 2017 to 2026.

General aviation airports play a crucial role in the economy and the daily lives of millions of people. They make a multi-billion impact on America's GDP and contribute more than one million jobs. Much of this directly supports rural communities. We support needed reforms to the Non-Primary Entitlement program to ensure continued access to these communities, and we strongly encourage public-private partnerships to help relieve the financial burden on airport sponsors and to build our airports of the

future. We need to move America's small airports to a place beyond simply surviving and toward thriving. Additionally, by understanding the role of general aviation in the economy and the access that small airports provide, as well as their importance to our citizens when disasters strike, we gain perspective on what our small airports do for us today and their incredible future potential.