

U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
Aviation and Space Subcommittee
“Improving Air Traffic Control for the American People: Examining the Current System” Hearing
September 24, 2019

As Prepared for Delivery

Thank you, Chairman Cruz, Ranking Member Sinema, and subcommittee members.

As president of the Air Line Pilots Association, Int’l, and a 40-year pilot with both airline and military flying experience, I’m honored to represent the more than 63,000 members of the world’s largest nongovernmental aviation safety organization.

Thanks to the leadership of this committee, as well as the dedication of stakeholders including the qualified, trained, and experienced airline pilots who serve as the greatest safety asset on any flight, the U.S. national airspace system is the safest, most efficient system in the world.

We commend this committee for its vision and commitment in holding this hearing today. As the United States works to meet growing passenger and freight transportation demands, as well as integrate new users such as commercial space flight and remotely piloted vehicles, air traffic control modernization will be critical.

Let me be clear, ALPA strongly supports NextGen! For more than a decade, we’ve collaborated with the regulator, airlines, and other stakeholders to ensure this modernization work is performed to the highest standards and incorporates frontline pilots’ perspectives.

We recognize NextGen has many benefits—from efficiency gains to emissions reduction. However, maintaining and enhancing safety through NextGen is ALPA’s highest priority.

For pilots on the flight deck, NextGen is already helping make our skies safer. The initiative has increased situational awareness and provided tools to help pilots make safe decisions through performance-based navigation, data communication, and ADS-B implementation.

However, we know NextGen’s potential is not being fully realized because many aircraft aren’t fully equipped... and long-term, stable funding hasn’t been secured.

Currently, a significant proportion of U.S. aircraft lack the onboard equipment necessary to utilize NextGen’s modernized approach procedures. As a result, pilots and air traffic controllers are forced to use “work-arounds” that allow them to operate aircraft with outdated equipment in today’s complex system.

Our need to conduct work-arounds adds to pilots’ workloads and makes it more difficult for us to adapt nimbly when the unexpected occurs. Being asked to constantly perform work-arounds also means my members are being forced to accept increased and unnecessary risk. We can do better. We must do better. To make the most of NextGen, we need industrywide requirements for equipping aircraft with the technology to support these procedures.

In addition to ensuring all U.S. airliners are equipped to use NextGen procedures, we need to ensure that staffing levels adequately match what will be continuously mounting traffic levels. To fully achieve a modernized air traffic control system, we need stable and reliable funding. We know from earlier this year that a one-month government shutdown translated into an 18-month delay in the deployment of the NextGen Data Comm program. We can do better. We *must* do better.

We are now six days away from another government shutdown. While there appears to be a path to provide stopgap funding for a few more weeks, it would be far preferable if our system could rely on a sustained source of funding. This would allow the United States to achieve all the benefits NextGen offers, not only now but in the future, as we work to fully integrate new entrants into our shared national airspace. In the meantime, ALPA supports the Aviation Funding Stability Act.

Take it from me, airline pilots feel passionate about all forms of flight. We're enthusiastic about commercial spaceflight—provided it's integrated safely into our shared national airspace. NextGen initiatives can help improve oceanic operations, which will allow us to safely manage the airspace at times when spacecraft transit it. Airline pilots, air traffic controllers, and commercial spacecraft operators would all benefit from improved ATC services.

We've achieved much through the NextGen program already, and ALPA pilots are eager to see even more of its potential realized. With the continued oversight and support of this committee, we're confident that we can—and we *will*—do more. ALPA pledges to continue to offer our expertise in what must be a collaborative effort to create an air traffic control system for the future that is efficient, modern, and most of all, safe.

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today.