

News from Congressman David Price (NC-04)

Chairman, House Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN DAVID PRICE ***Aviation Security Hearing, 10 am (statement as prepared)***

I want to welcome our four witnesses this morning, Assistant Secretary Kip Hawley, the TSA Administrator; Ms. Cathleen Berrick, Director for Homeland Security and Justice Issues at the Government Accountability Office; Mr. James Bennett, President and CEO of the Washington Metropolitan Airport Authority; and Ms. Peggy Sterling, Vice President, Safety and Security for American Airlines.

Today we review the Transportation Security Administration's efforts to improve the efficiency of the aviation security system in the context of the agency's 2009 budget request. While traveler wait times at the nation's top 40 airports average only 5 minutes, we all know that wait times can grow dramatically. We must find ways to move airline travelers, their luggage, and air cargo expeditiously while at the same time strengthening security. How we are going to do that will be a focus of this hearing.

For fiscal year 2009, TSA is requesting a discretionary appropriation of \$4.057 billion--an increase of less than one percent above 2008, far less than is needed even to address the effects of inflation. This, despite the public's growing demands on our aviation system and the fact that the aviation industry and our airports remain a valued target for terrorist attacks against our economy and our homeland. Based on the challenges we face, one would expect significant increases across several TSA accounts. But there are only a few increases proposed in this budget--for Secure Flight and for vetting operations.

The budget request cuts key programs that help our aviation system operate more efficiently. For example, the request almost halves funding for checkpoint equipment and explosive detection systems (-\$262.4 million) at the same time airlines and airports are facing rapid growth in travelers and much of the checked baggage screening equipment is reaching the end of its useful life. To make up for some of these substantial reductions, the budget assumes a new aviation surcharge totaling \$426 million that must be adopted by the authorizing Committees. This surcharge, which has been rejected by Congress in the past, is something we Appropriators have no control over. It is hard to discern how the Administration can claim to adequately provide for the country's security when this budget proposes to cut the most critical programs designed for its protection and it relies on funds that are uncertain.

These budget reductions are being proposed as more and more demands are being placed on the aviation system. Since 2005, passenger levels have consistently exceeded those experienced before 9/11, overcoming the precipitous decline in airline travelers after that tragic event. The

Bureau of Transportation Statistics estimates that 2007 traffic will be 3.6 percent above 2006 (744 million passengers). And FAA is optimistic about the future, estimating that U.S. commercial aviation is on track to carry one billion passengers per year by 2015. With these record traffic levels and threats to our homeland, a flat budget will simply not suffice.

The efficient screening of airline passengers is a task that TSA has not yet mastered. Repeatedly TSA has told this Committee that Secure Flight is the solution to this problem because it will allow the agency to focus more effectively on the few worrisome individuals that need additional scrutiny, with fewer disruptions for travelers who pose no threat. As you know, there is already a voluntary passenger screening system—registered traveler—that provides expedited screening for passengers who volunteer to undergo a security threat assessment to confirm that they do not pose a threat to transportation or national security. But the benefits of this program are unclear; at best, the travelers who participate get to move to the front of the security line, but they are still subject to the normal security checks. How either Secure Flight or registered traveler will help the agency better target passenger screening at the checkpoint remains to be seen.

Finally, with the adoption of the 9/11 Act, TSA was given additional security requirements, including better vetting of transportation employees and stricter mandates on air cargo screening. On air cargo specifically, the 9/11 Act requires that, by February 2009, 50 percent of all air cargo being carried on passenger aircraft must be screened, with a 100 percent screening requirement beginning in August 2010. Yet the 2009 budget request does not appear to include any new funding to meet this mandate. So I question how requirements of the 9/11 Act can possibly be met with this budget.

I look forward to your testimony this morning. First, we will begin with Mr. Hawley, followed by Ms. Berrick, Mr. Bennett, and then Ms. Sterling. Your full written statements will be placed in the record. However, before we begin, let me recognize our distinguished Ranking Member Mr. Rogers for any comments he may wish to make.

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