

National Air Traffic Controllers Association

AFL-CIO

Testimony of
Paul Rinaldi, President, National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA)
"Review of Air Traffic Control Reform Proposals"
House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee
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Thank you Chairman Shuster, Ranking Member DeFazio, Chairman LoBiondo, Ranking Member Larsen and members of this committee.

I am grateful for the opportunity to testify today as we discuss air traffic control reform and the FAA Reauthorization bill, H.R. 4441. NATCA supports this bill, because it contains necessary reforms that we believe will help us maintain the safest, most efficient airspace in the world while we move forward with innovative modernization projects, while protecting the workforce.

We all have a stake in this country's National Airspace System (NAS). It's an economic engine, contributing \$1.5 trillion annually to our gross domestic product and providing over 12 million American jobs.

Currently, we run the largest, safest, most efficient, most complex, and most diverse airspace system in the world. Our system is unique, unequaled and unrivaled by any other country – due in large part to the impeccable work of the men and women I represent who run this system. The United States airspace system is considered the gold standard in the world aviation industry. And yet, we have come to the difficult reality that change may be needed-- globalization and innovation are driving dramatic changes in the aviation industry and sadly our current structure cannot keep up.

The current aviation system has served us well until recent years. Unfortunately, we no longer have a stable or predictable funding stream and this uncertainty has caused many serious problems for the system.

Without change, we face continued funding uncertainty. We all remember the disruptions we experienced in 2013 with sequestration. The FAA scaled down all modernization projects. The Agency looked at closing 238 air traffic control towers and tried to close 149 of them due to purely financial reasons, without regard to operational considerations or what was best for the NAS. They considered reducing services at many airports across the country. They halted air traffic controller hiring for the full year, which is still contributing to staffing problems today. The FAA was forced to furlough air traffic controllers, causing rippling delays through our system. Further, the Agency went to a fix-on-fail maintenance philosophy and stopped stockpiling critical parts for essential equipment. These decisions were all made in order to meet the budget restrictions of sequestration, not for operational reasons or to ensure safety. Our 24/7 aviation system has been challenged by 23 extensions in authorization, a partial shutdown, a complete government shutdown as well as numerous threatened shutdowns. We are currently in our first extension, and if we are honest with each other, we are looking at the very least, at one more extension. All stakeholders in the NAS must work together to ensure that the United States remains the world leader in aviation.

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With all of these challenges in mind, we applaud the hard work of all the members on the Committee to draft a comprehensive FAA reauthorization bill to address these long-standing problems.

NATCA has publicly stated that any FAA restructuring must achieve the following:

In order to maintain NATCA's support, any new system must ensure that our members are fully protected in their employment relationship. Maintaining our members' pay and benefits, including retirement and health care, along with our negotiated agreements for their work rules, are crucial to us.

- Safety and efficiency remain the top priorities. This means that we cannot allow maintenance to lag, and cannot reduce staffing to save money. The NAS must remain fully staffed in order to ensure both safety and efficiency.
- A stable, predictable funding stream must adequately support air traffic control services, staffing, hiring and training, long-term modernization projects, preventative maintenance, and ongoing modernization to the physical infrastructure. The stop and go funding crises create staffing shortages, which slow the hiring and training process. Inadequate funding also prevents NextGen modernization projects from timely implementation. Any new system must improve upon the status quo, by providing an environment that promotes growth in the system and allows us to lead the world in aviation innovation.
- A dynamic aviation system that continues to provide services to all segments of the aviation community, from commercial passenger carriers and cargo haulers, to business jets, to general aviation, from the major airports to those in small communities and rural America. We cannot emphasize enough how important it is that a new system continues providing services to the diverse users of the NAS. The United States has a vibrant general aviation community that relies on us. At the same time, rural America's economic success is connected to the access we create with our comprehensive NAS that serves even the most remote areas.

We believe the legislation addresses NATCA's primary issues of concern.

A not-for-profit independent organization run by a board of stakeholders could deliver results similar to those we have seen in Canada where NavCanada has had two decades to prove itself as a safe and innovative airspace system.

Finally, I want to state clearly that we will continue to vigorously and carefully review this legislation at all times. If at any time there are changes to this bill, we will immediately examine them to ensure the bill continues to align with our organization's policies, practices, and principles. We reserve the right to withhold our support if any changes cause the bill to violate our principles.

We are excited to be a part of this important discussion. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this bill and I look forward to any questions.