

Testimony by Congressman Terry Everett before the House Transportation and  
Infrastructure Committee Subcommittee on Aviation  
Hearing on Rural Air Service  
April 25, 2007

Chairman Costello and Ranking Member Petri,

I would like to begin by thanking the committee for allowing me the opportunity to appear here today. The issue of rural air service is an important one which affects the millions of Americans. As many of my colleagues from rural and small communities across the country can attest, the weekly flights to and from Washington can be a trying experience. The many inconveniences associated with these flights are also experienced by our constituents.

The Essential Air Service (EAS) and Small Community Air Service Development (SCASD) programs seek to address the problems associated with rural air service by providing assistance to small communities across the country.

While southeast Alabama does not have a community served by the EAS program, two airports in the second district have been recent recipients of SCASD grants. These grants have been helpful to my district.

In 2003, Dothan, Alabama received a SCASD grant. Presently, Atlantic Southeast Airlines (ASA) is the only airline which provides service into Dothan. The Dothan Airport Authority used the grant to develop a marketing program to increase enplanements.

Despite an overall positive assessment of the SCASD program, the Dothan Airport Authority did report some difficulties associated with the administration of the program by the Department of Transportation. Specifically, the Dothan Airport Authority has informed me that the accounting procedures associated with the DOT-administered program were redundant at best and cumbersome and time-consuming at worst. The Dothan Airport Authority believes that an accounting process modeled on the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) Airport Improvement Program (AIP) would be of more assistance. With the DOT-administered program, it could take as long as eight months to get reimbursed for funds spent as part of the grant. By contrast, it has normally taken the Dothan airport no longer than 48 hours to get reimbursed for funds allocated under the FAA's AIP program.

In 2005, Montgomery, Alabama also received a SCASD grant to expand air service in the state, though it has yet to spend any of the money allocated. The grant was awarded to increase service between Montgomery and Detroit. Under the terms of the grant, the Montgomery Airport Authority would mitigate some of the risk associated with the operation of a new route by Northwest airlines. However, Northwest Airlines declared bankruptcy shortly after the grant was awarded in 2005. As a result, all new plans for expansion were frozen, including the proposed direct route between Montgomery and Detroit.

It seems to me that the SCASD program should be structured in a way that benefits the communities and not a particular airline. The SCASD program cannot serve the people of

Montgomery in the timeliest way possible because the grant cannot be transferred to another airline. Yet when the Montgomery Airport Authority requested that it be allowed to change the grant to another airline, it was informed that the grant was awarded to the airport in order to expand service with Northwest Airlines, and that if it would like to spend the funds on a new purpose, it would have to submit a new application.

While the Small Community Air Service Development Program provides much needed assistance to improve air service in southeast Alabama, there are several problems that are not addressed by these programs that I would like to bring to your attention.

Air service in small to mid-sized communities, like Dothan and Montgomery, are left at the whim of corporate airlines whose benign neglect oftentimes results in lengthy delays and cancellations. This haphazard service impacts both business travelers and tourists, and impedes the ability of the communities to attract and retain economic development.

As I mentioned earlier, Dothan is served by only one airline, ASA. According to their own statistics, ASA flights from Dothan to Atlanta are delayed 50% of the time, and it is the only location to which ASA flies from Dothan. In addition, ASA flights from Atlanta to Dothan are delayed 70% of the time. That's right, 7 in 10 flights leaving Atlanta for Dothan are delayed. This abysmal record has led Dothan residents to refer to ASA as the Accidentally Scheduled Airline.

Montgomery has also had its share of problems with ASA. While the city is served by four airlines, ASA carries the vast majority of passengers traveling through the airport, and receives the vast majority of complaints. While the airline has a 98% completion rate into and out of Montgomery, its record for handling baggage is absolutely horrible. Indeed, ASA is the industry leader in lost baggage. This may not mean much for business travelers who often carry baggage onto the plane. But it is of immense concern for families leaving on vacation, or those traveling for the holidays. In addition, the new carry-on baggage restrictions have increased the amount of bags checked by business travelers.

I would like to close by thanking the committee again for allowing me the opportunity to discuss this important issue with you today. While the EAS and SCASD programs are valuable tools with which to address the problems plaguing rural air service, it remains clear that they aren't enough. Congress must do something more to address these problems. And I stand ready to work with the Chairman, Ranking Member, and members of the committee to improve air service for the millions of Americans who live in rural areas and small communities across the country.