

Written Testimony of

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“AMERICA BUILDS: AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL SYSTEM INFRASTRUCTURE AND
STAFFING”



Good morning, Chairman Nehls, Ranking Member Cohen, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. My name is Paul Rinaldi. I spent 30 years in the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)—15 years as a front-line controller at Washington Dulles Tower and Terminal Radar Approach Control (TRACON), and another 15 years in leadership with the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA), including three years as Executive Vice President and 12 years as President. In 2021, upon reaching the mandatory retirement age of 56, I concluded my FAA career. I then founded a consulting firm to continue providing air traffic control expertise and to support the enhancement of the National Airspace System (NAS).

During my tenure with NATCA, I testified before this committee multiple times, warning that the “status quo of the National Airspace System is unacceptable.” In 2016, I stated: “We run the largest, safest, most efficient, most complex, and most diverse airspace system in the world. The United States airspace system is considered the gold standard in the world aviation industry. And yet, we must face the reality that we need change—globalization and innovation are driving dramatic shifts in aviation, and our current structure cannot keep up. We no longer have a stable or predictable funding stream, and this uncertainty has caused serious problems for the system. The status quo is unacceptable. We need to act before the unthinkable happens.”

Unfortunately, the United States Airspace System is no longer considered the gold standard worldwide.

Several critical issues, including aging infrastructure, outdated technology, staffing shortages, and a broken hiring and training process, have been persistent concerns for decades. The consequences of these issues could be severe, impacting efficiency, safety, and national security.

We are all deeply saddened that the unthinkable did happen.

Aviation Safety and FAA Reform

On January 29, 2025, a midair collision over the Potomac River near Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (DCA) claimed 67 lives, including three military service members aboard a U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopter. This tragedy was not an unforeseen catastrophe but a preventable failure. There were warning signs—identical incidents at DCA had occurred and were narrowly avoided only because they happened in daylight when helicopters were better able to take evasive action. Why did these near-misses not lead to improvements? Why did we wait for disaster?

NTSB chair Jennifer Homendy had been among those sounding the loudest warnings, telling reporters in late 2023 that the air traffic system needed relief, which could come in the form of increased funding for controllers or improved technology.

“We are sounding the alarm bells, and we need action,” Homendy said at the time. She added: “I don’t want to hear about summits — goddamn, do something.”

There is a generally held truism in the FAA that “our rules are written in blood” because accidents seem to be our catalyst for meaningful action. The FAA has not shed this truism but rather has doubled down on it. For example, safety industries, such as aviation, rely on redundancy. Aircraft have three or four redundant systems. But the FAA has reverted to a fix-on-fail policy, eliminating the redundancy that makes the system safe. The FAA is not solely responsible. Most of these decisions were a result of congressional actions—or, perhaps more accurately, inaction.

Aviation safety is a journey, not a destination. We cannot rest on "good enough" when lives are at stake. The FAA must confront its tombstone mentality and move away from this fix-on-fail approach. The kind of reform we need is not about tweaking a regulation here or there—it requires wholesale change. We need a systematic, precise overhaul from hiring and training to equipping and oversight. The FAA must prioritize proactive safety measures and redundancy rather than waiting for failures to spur action.

Stable Aviation Funding

Decades of shutdowns and funding uncertainty have left our system antiquated. This stop-and-go funding cycle cripples modernization efforts and jeopardizes safety. A 2024 GAO report found that 58 critical systems within the NAS are either “unsustainable or potentially unsustainable,” posing operational risks.

Since the start of Fiscal Year 2018, the FAA has experienced three shutdowns and 29 additional threatened shutdowns either due to a lapse in appropriations or a lapse in FAA authorization. The following is a timeline of this stop-and-go funding cycle for that time period.

- Jan. 20, 2018 - THREE-DAY SHUTDOWN (CR through 2/9)
- Feb. 9, 2018 - MULTI-HOUR SHUTDOWN (CR through 3/23)
- March 23, 2018 – Threatened Lapse in Appropriations (CR through 9/30)
- Oct. 1, 2018 – Threatened Lapse in both Appropriations and FAA Authorization (received CR through 12/7; and FAA Extension through 10/7)

- Oct. 7, 2018 – Threatened Lapse in FAA Authorization (H.R. 302 - 5-year FAA Reauthorization)
- Dec. 7, 2018 – Threatened Lapse in Appropriations (CR through 12/2)
- Dec. 22, 2018 – 35-DAY SHUTDOWN (CR through 2/15)
- Feb. 15, 2019 – Threatened Lapse in Appropriations
- Oct. 1, 2019 - Threatened Lapse in Appropriations
- Nov. 21, 2019 - Threatened Lapse in Appropriations
- Dec. 20, 2019 - Threatened Lapse in Appropriations
- Oct. 1, 2020 - Threatened Lapse in Appropriations
- Dec. 11, 2020 - Threatened Lapse in Appropriations
- Dec. 21, 2020 - Threatened Lapse in Appropriations
- Dec. 27, 2020 - Threatened Lapse in Appropriations
- Sept. 30, 2021 - Threatened Lapse in Appropriations
- Dec. 3, 2021 - Threatened Lapse in Appropriations
- Feb. 18, 2022 - Threatened Lapse in Appropriations
- March 11, 2022 - Threatened Lapse in Appropriations
- Sept. 30, 2022 - Threatened Lapse in Appropriations
- Dec. 14, 2022 - Threatened Lapse in Appropriations
- Dec. 23, 2022 - Threatened Lapse in Appropriations
- Dec. 30, 2022 - Threatened Lapse in Appropriations
- Sept 30, 2023 - Threatened Lapse in both Appropriations and FAA Authorization (Appropriations extension through 11/17 & FAA Authorization extension through 12/31)
- Nov. 17, 2023 - Threatened Lapse in Appropriations (CR through 1/19/24)
- Dec 31, 2023 - Threatened Lapse in FAA Authorization (Extension through 3/8/24)
- Jan. 19, 2024 - Threatened Lapse in Appropriations
- March 1, 2024 - Threatened Lapse in Appropriations (Extension through 3/9)

- March 8, 2024 - Threatened Lapse in both Appropriations and FAA Authorization (“minibus) appropriations package through 9/30 and FAA Authorization extension through 5/10)
- May 10, 2024 - Lapse in FAA Authorization
- May 16, 2024 - FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 (FAA authorized through FY2028)
- Sept. 30, 2024 - Threatened Lapse in Appropriations (Extension through 12/20)
- Dec. 20, 2024 - Threatened Lapse in Appropriations (Extension through 3/14/25)

Some argue that privatization / corporatization is the answer. It could be—but only if done correctly. The FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018 – the Aviation Improvement, Reauthorization, and Reform (AIRR) Act – provided a viable framework for separating the Air Traffic Organization ATO from federal appropriations, ensuring stable, predictable funding. However, any effort must not operate as a for-profit model that prioritizes revenue over safety.

Modernization: Falling Behind the World

The U.S. has long led the world in aviation innovation, but today, we are being lapped by other countries. Our outdated procurement process forces us to develop and deploy systems under decades-old regulations and inconsistent funding, leading to delays and obsolescence before implementation.

One glaring example is the Notice to Airmen (NOTAM) system. Two years ago, a NOTAM outage halted air travel nationwide—the second time in history that has happened. Despite congressional funding for an upgrade, the only tangible change has been renaming the system twice. This is emblematic of a broader failure: instead of modernizing, we are patching broken systems and renaming problems.

FAA leadership itself acknowledges the dire state of infrastructure. The condition of our air traffic control facilities and radars continues to worsen. FAA towers now average 40 years old, TRACONs 27 years, Air Route Traffic Control Centers (ARTCCs) 62 years, and the majority of radars are approaching 40 years. Structural deficiencies and maintenance issues are becoming more frequent and apparent. Aging facilities add risk to the system, including service disruptions.

Modernization is not about replacing controllers with automation; it is about giving highly skilled professionals the tools they need to maximize their performance. Right now,

controllers are supporting outdated equipment, when the equipment should be supporting them.

Air Traffic Controller Training and the Enhanced Collegiate Training Initiative (ECTI)

Air traffic controller staffing shortages have become a crisis, exacerbated by rising attrition rates. A proven solution exists: the Enhanced Air Traffic Collegiate Training Initiative (Enhanced AT-CTI).

Enhanced AT-CTI was established in 1989 to train controllers through FAA-approved college programs, allowing graduates to bypass the FAA Academy and begin facility training directly. The program was highly successful, largely immune to government shutdowns, and accelerated staffing. However, quality concerns led to its replacement with the OPM Air Traffic Training and Selection Tool (ATSAT) and a Biographical Questionnaire, which introduced unnecessary obstacles to hiring. I testified about these problems in 2015, yet the flawed system remained in place.

Reintroducing Enhanced AT-CTI has already begun to allow us to accelerate controller staffing and also provide a framework for Federal Contract Towers, many of which struggle to maintain operational hours due to staffing shortages. The FAA recently signed agreements with CTI schools to become part of the AT-CTI program - Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, the University of Oklahoma, and Tulsa Community College.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

Like any race, progress is measured in stages. We must recognize the strides we have made, the hurdles we still face, and the critical need for sustained momentum. The United States must reclaim its status as the gold standard in aviation safety and innovation.

I urge this committee to take the necessary steps—whether through policy, funding, or regulatory support—to ensure that we, as a nation, do not stumble. The true victory is not simply reaching the finish line, but ensuring that all those who depend on our aviation system—our communities, our families, and future generations—stand together on that medal podium, knowing that the effort, sacrifice, and perseverance were worth it.

I look forward to answering your questions and working with this esteemed body to move forward. Thank you.