Written Statement
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House Aviation Subcommittee Hearing
"Connecting Rural America to the National Airspace System"
June 4, 2026

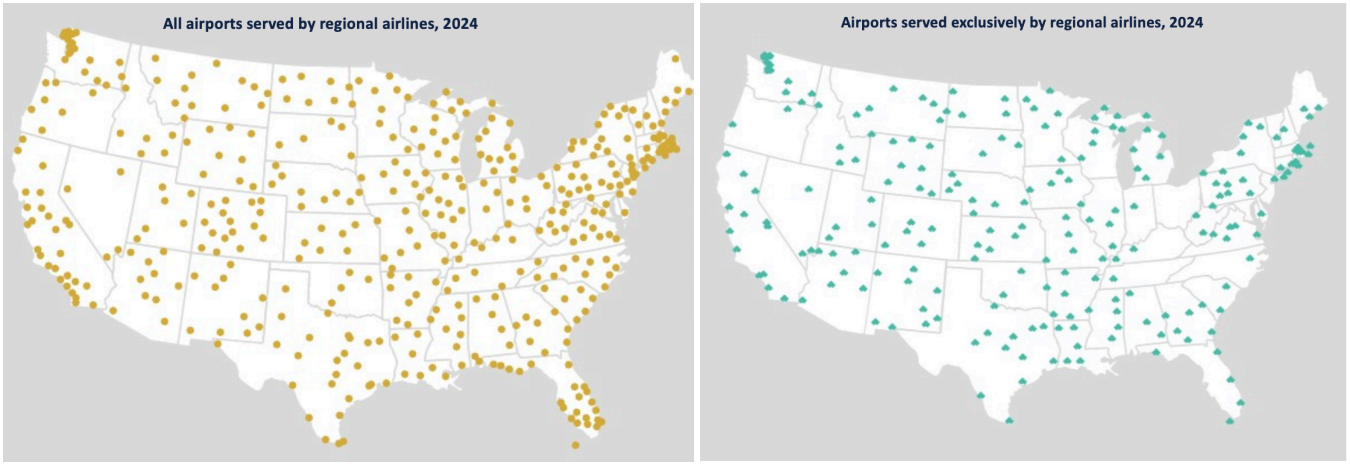
Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Regional Airline Association.

The Importance of Rural Air Service

Last year, regional airlines operated approximately one in three scheduled passenger departures in the United States and served 94 percent of the nation's commercially served airports. By contrast, larger, mainline carriers directly served just 36 percent. This means that for two-thirds of our nation's airports, regional airlines provide the *only* scheduled, commercial air service available. Without them, much of the country would lose access to the national air transportation system altogether.

Regional aviation is how residents in smaller communities reach medical specialists, universities, military installations, customers, suppliers, and family members. It is how businesses stay connected to markets, how employers recruit, how rural communities remain accessible, and how smaller cities participate in the national economy.

Figure 1. Regional Airlines and the National Air Service Footprint (48 Contiguous States)



Regional air service to small communities also generates substantial national economic activity. Across hundreds of communities nationwide, regional air service supports approximately $152.8 billion in annual economic output, 1.1 million jobs, and $41.3 billion in wages and earnings.[1]

Regional air service also provides value beyond the local market itself. Many passengers traveling from smaller communities ultimately connect through larger hub airports before continuing elsewhere in the network. Those passengers help support the hub-and-spoke system that underpins air transportation in the United States. As a

[1] *Lindemuth, Z., Meehan, D., Swelbar, W., & Zhong, A. (2021, August). Economic Impact of Small Community Airports [Report].*

result, decisions about regional air service are not just local, but relate to the flow of passengers throughout the network and the ability of airlines to connect smaller communities to the hubs and beyond.

Over the past fifteen years, and most acutely after the pandemic, regional aviation absorbed a major structural shock. A severe, sustained pilot shortage that was present before the pandemic became a crisis in its aftermath. Regional airlines are typically the career entry point for the pilot workforce, and mainline carriers hired aggressively from regional airline ranks when rebuilding their own workforce after pandemic exits. Because the pilot pipeline had already been straining, regional operators lost pilots faster than the system could replace them, leading to multiple bankruptcies, liquidations and an enormous fleet contraction.

Figure 2. Thirteen Regional Airline Bankruptcies or Liquidations Since 2009

Pilot supply was a prominent driver in five. Fleet and contract economics drove four. COVID demand collapse drove four more.

Year	Airline	Outcome	Cited reasons
2010	Mesa Air Group	Chapter 11 (emerged 2011)	Excess aircraft leases; Hawaiian lawsuit
2010	Gulfstream International	Chapter 11; sold to Victory Park	Fuel costs; declining traffic; debt
2012	Pinnacle / Mesaba / Colgan	Chapter 11; brands wound down	Pilot staffing shortage; failed integration; 50-seat economics
2012	Comair	Shut down by Delta	50-seat aircraft economics; Delta strategy
2016	Republic Airways	Chapter 11 (emerged 2017)	Nationwide pilot shortage grounding aircraft
2018	Great Lakes Airlines	Ceased scheduled operations	Pilot shortage
2020	Trans States Airlines	Ceased operations	Pilot shortage; United consolidation; COVID
2020	Compass Airlines	Ceased operations	AA LAX pullback; COVID demand collapse
2020	Ravn Air Group	Chapter 11; assets sold	COVID — 90% revenue loss in weeks
2020	ExpressJet	Ceased operations	Lost United contract; COVID
2022	ExpressJet / aha!	Chapter 11 → Chapter 7	Aircraft availability; rising costs; COVID variants
2024	Silver Airways	Chapter 11 → Chapter 7 (2025)	ATR fleet transition problems; debt
2025	Ravn Alaska	Ceased all operations	Pilot shortages; rising costs; lease losses

Pilot shortage cited as a prominent driver | Fleet or contract economics prominent | COVID-era demand collapse

Source: bankruptcy court filings; company press releases; trade press. Pinnacle/Mesaba/Colgan treated as a single event under Pinnacle's 2012 Chapter 11.

As regional airlines parked more than a quarter of the industry's fleet without enough pilots available to operate them, departures and destinations plunged at individual communities across the nation, most pronouncedly at small and rural airports. These communities watched their access to the national network erode, even while aggregate numbers showed recovery.

Much of that lost service has not come back. Sometimes, we hear that loss being characterized through a deceptively simple lens: if passengers truly valued the service, every traveler would use it, and the market would sustain it. That explanation overlooks many of the forces that shape air service decisions and connectivity. Passengers respond to the network available to them. When departures fall, frequency falls. When destination options are eliminated, connectivity is weakened. When schedules no longer support convenient connections, travel behavior changes. Some trips are never taken, and some passengers with the time, means, and flexibility to do so drive farther to larger airports. Those outcomes are sometimes mistaken for consumer preference, but often the reality is the system lost operational capacity first, airports lost meaningful connectivity next, and passenger behavior and industry economics evolved in response. Unfortunately, long-distance driving is often portrayed as a neutral substitute for lost air service, even when it means several hours on the road in difficult weather, reduced access for elderly or medically vulnerable passengers, economic stagnation for rural communities, and substantially weaker connectivity for the Americans who live there.

Air service connectivity also has safety implications. When communities lose practical access to air service, more travel is shifted onto the highway system, where NHTSA data indicates 39,254 people lost their lives in 2024.[2] This impact is worse for rural citizens. In 2023, the most recent year for which rural breakdowns are available, NHTSA found that rural roads carried a fatality rate approximately 1.5 times higher than urban roads, and that 41 percent of highway fatalities occurred on rural roads despite only 20 percent of Americans living in rural areas.[3] Maintaining air service in smaller communities is therefore not only an economic issue; it is also part of a safer transportation system.

Summary of Recommendations

The following is a summary of RAA's recommendations to ensure air service connectivity for rural America, which are outlined in greater detail in my written statement:

Extend Air Traffic Control (ATC) Modernization and Safety Enhancements to Airports of All Sizes

Extend risk-based, comprehensive airport safety reviews to all airports with a substantial mix of commercial, general aviation, business, and military traffic. Close-proximity events have occurred at smaller airports that lack radar, Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast-In (ADS-B In), or other situational-awareness tools.

Pass H.R. 8597, the Air Traffic Situational Awareness Enhancement Act. This would mandate installation of Airborne Position Reference Tools (APRT) at contract towers lacking advanced situational-awareness systems.

Require Common Traffic Advisory Frequency (CTAF) communication near mixed-use airports. Such communication is recommended but not required today, creating risk at smaller airports.

Require use of ADS-B In and authorize the use of Electronic Flight Bag (EFB) based ADS-B In as in-panel ADS-B In and Airborne Collision Avoidance System X (ACAS-X) are developed and commercialized for all commercial aircraft. EFB solutions can deliver safety improvements near-term, while in-panel ADS-B In and ACAS-X depend on manufacturing and certification timelines outside carrier control.

Protect Small Community Air Service

Fully fund the Essential Air Service (EAS) program. EAS preserves a baseline of critical air service connectivity for many communities.

Reassess whether Small Community Air Service Development Program (SCASDP) funding levels remain adequate. Rising costs have meant grant dollars to help communities attract service do not go as far as they once did.

Examine tools to sustain service after SCASDP grants end. SCASDP helps build the market, but some communities struggle to sustain service when margins remain fragile. Expanded funding, stronger transition tools, or other targeted connectivity supports could help communities maintain service once an initial grant period closes.

Support Tomorrow's Aviation Workforce

Build on the FAA Reauthorization Act's maintenance workforce foundation. Maintenance shortages affect aircraft utilization, reliability, and small-community service.

[2] National total: NHTSA, early/annual traffic fatality data for 2024 (39,254 fatalities; rate 1.19 per 100M VMT).
[3] Rural figures: NHTSA, Rural/Urban Traffic Fatalities: 2023 Data, Report No. DOT HS 813 728.

Align federal student aid with the cost of accredited flight training. Flight training costs exceed current federal student loan limits by $80,000 on average, blocking capable students without wealth or credit from pilot careers.

Modernize GI Bill eligibility for pilot training. Current rules disallow use of earned benefits for the private pilot certificate—the first required certificate.

Regional Airline Partnerships

Regional airlines reach communities that larger mainline aircraft often cannot economically or operationally serve directly. Most regional airline flying in the United States occurs under Capacity Purchase Agreements (CPAs), where regional airlines operate flights on behalf of larger network carriers. Under CPAs, the major airline partner generally controls network planning, ticket pricing, scheduling, and fuel purchasing, while the regional carrier provides the crews, maintenance, and operational execution using aircraft that may be owned or leased by either the major airline partner or the regional airline itself. Other regional airlines operate under a pro-rate model, where the airline retains ticket revenue directly and bears substantially greater exposure to fuel prices, demand fluctuation, and rising operating costs.

Figure 3. Regional Airline Partnerships

Marketing Carrier	Regional Brand	Operating Carriers
Alaska Air Group (AS)	Alaska Airlines	**Horizon Air (QX)** SkyWest Airlines (OO)
American Airlines (AA)	American Eagle	**Envoy Air (MQ)** **Piedmont Airlines (PT)** **PSA Airlines (OH)** Republic Airways (YX) SkyWest Airlines (OO)
Delta Air Lines (DL)	Delta Connection	**Endeavor Air (9E)** Republic Airways (YX) SkyWest Airlines (OO)
United Airlines (UA)	United Express	CommuteAir (C5) GoJet Airlines (G7) Mesa Airlines (YV) Republic Airways (YX) SkyWest Airlines (OO)

Wholly-owned subsidiaries of major airlines shown in **BOLD**.

Small Aircraft Economics

The economics of serving smaller communities differ from those of larger hub markets. Smaller aircraft have fewer seats over which to distribute operating costs, making lower-density routes inherently more sensitive to changes in labor, maintenance, airport, financing, fuel, and infrastructure costs on a per-passenger basis.

The pilot shortage intensified those pressures. Regional airlines made substantial increases in pilot compensation to attract qualified aviators in an extraordinarily competitive labor market. These investments were positive and helped to attract more candidates, but also materially increased the cost of operating smaller aircraft serving lower-density markets.

Fuel costs present another challenge. While the major airline partner purchases fuel under CPA flying, prices still influence broader network economics and decisions regarding aircraft deployment. Carriers operating under pro-rate arrangements face more direct exposure to fuel price volatility. Rising costs do not always result in the complete elimination of service, but they can affect the economics of operating smaller aircraft in lower-density markets, weakening margins that are already thin.

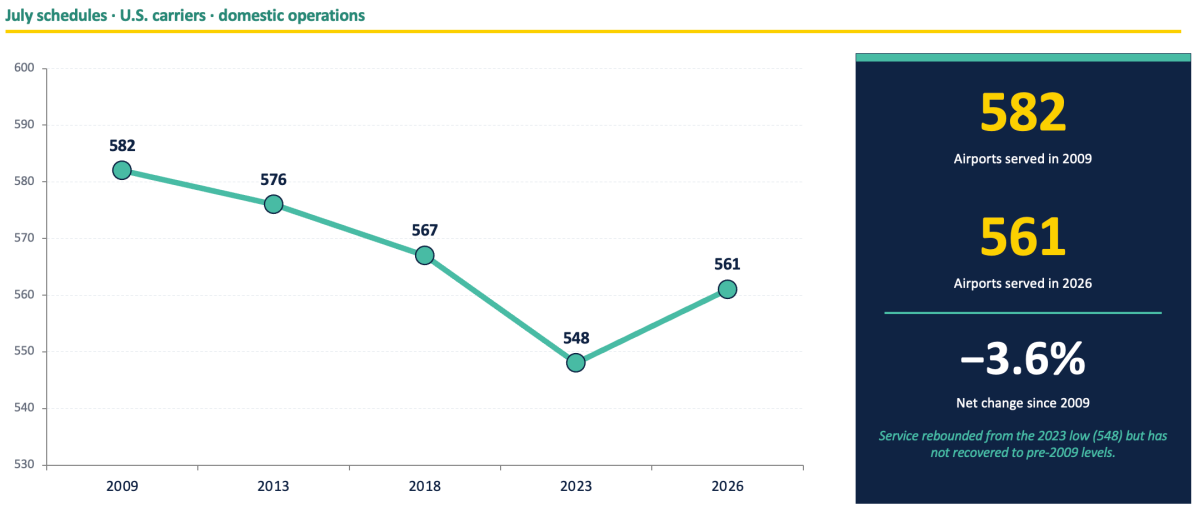
When starting or restoring regional air service after a disruption, the economics are not limited to the route itself. Airlines must build local operations, secure facilities and ground equipment, establish fuel and handling arrangements, staff the station, support marketing and community awareness, and integrate the service into the broader network. These startup and transition costs can be substantial, particularly in rural markets served by one or only a few carriers. For these same reasons, once service is lost, restoring it is often more difficult and more expensive than preserving it in the first place.

Decisions about regional deployment are almost always made by the network carrier, including where and how flights are scheduled. But regional airlines view these communities as far more than just assigned destinations. We know that when small communities lose service, it disrupts lives, isolates communities, and weakens the well-being of working families across the country. When regional air service is added, travel opportunities expand for the same population, rural economies benefit, and the people who live there become better connected with the world around them.

An Uneven Recovery

For more than a decade, RAA has tracked changes in small-community and rural air service connectivity, and published quarterly updates as the pilot shortage deepened, to better understand how individual communities were being affected. We tracked a sharp deterioration in air service alongside regional airline industry contraction during the height of the pilot shortage and post-pandemic recovery period. By 2023, the number of airports receiving scheduled regional airline service had fallen to its lowest level in years.

Figure 4. Airports Receiving Scheduled Airline Service



More recently, service levels have improved from that nadir, although the recovery has been uneven. In May 2026, overall departures and seats were up compared with May 2019, yet 193 airports still had less service than before the pandemic, down by an average of 31 percent. Ninety airports lost at least a quarter of their service, 35 lost more than half, and 14 lost service entirely. Small hubs as a category gained departures, but one in five small hub airports still had less service in May 2026 than in May 2019.

Nonhub airports as a category are down just 2.5 percent, yet more than half of nonhub airports lost service, often significantly. Sixty-three nonhub airports lost at least a quarter of their flights, 20 lost more than half of their flights, and two lost all air service. Nonprimary airports, the smallest commercial category, took the largest hit.

Down as a category by 14.4 percent, 80 nonprimary airports lost service, with an average loss of 48.3 percent of flights.

Figure 5. Recovery Is Underway — But Communities Are Still Down Meaningful Service

Source: Cirium SRS Analyser, May 2019 vs. May 2026 schedules. Contiguous U.S. airports; Alaska/Hawaii/PR included in headline % figures.

Seat counts can mask a subtler form of loss: a community can gain seats while losing the frequency and destinations that make air service useful. We began tracking this trend in 2009. Since then, seats have increased across every airport category, but departures have decreased in all of them. Destination options declined at all but the largest airports. The losses were sharpest at the smallest airports — nonprimary airports lost 32.2 percent of departures and 29.5 percent of their routes.

Figure 6. Larger Aircraft Mean Fewer Departures and Routes

2026

vs.

2009

July schedules

	Departures	Seats	Routes
Large	−2.0%	+26.7%	+14.4%
Medium	−4.7%	+33.7%	+8.4%
Small	−5.3%	+41.2%	+5.4%
Nonhub	−13.3%	+46.2%	+3.1%
Nonprimary	−32.2%	+29.2%	−29.5%

Source: Cirium SRS Analyser. July schedules, U.S. carriers, domestic operations. Prepared May 4, 2026. NPIAS hub categories.

Ultimately, passengers do not experience air service in the aggregate — they experience whether the network still meets their needs. By that measure, the nation's air service network does not serve rural America nearly as well as it serves our urban centers.

Pilot Supply and Small Community Air Service

While costs, fleet availability, and network economics all played a role, workforce availability was the most significant constraint on regional air service during this period. The more closely RAA tracked service patterns, the clearer it became that the availability of pilots shaped the availability of air service — in both directions. As staffing pressures eased and regional airlines returned aircraft and crews to service, communities began to recover connectivity. Ultimately, communities cannot receive air service that airlines do not have the crews to operate.

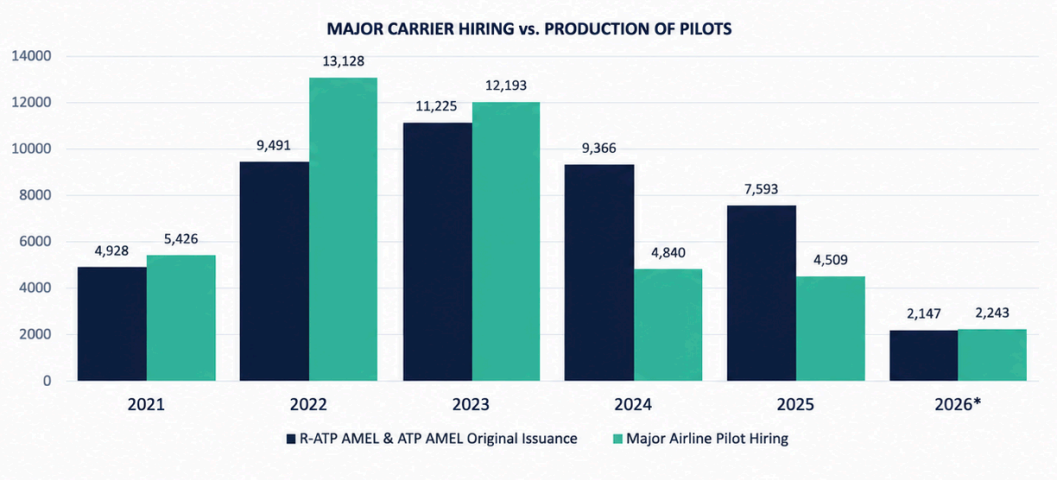
Today’s environment continues to be more stable than the peak disruption period. But the underlying pilot shortage has not been resolved. As of May 2026, there were 128,161 Airline Transport Pilot, Airplane Multi-Engine

Land (ATP AMEL) pilots with valid first-class medicals. More than 13 percent will reach mandatory retirement age within five years, and 41 percent within fifteen years.

That retirement wave arrives before accounting for growth or even full restoration of communities' previously lost service. Current mainline hiring moderation has been influenced by temporary conditions, including delayed aircraft deliveries and slower fleet growth. Major airline hiring dropped 60 percent from 2023 to 2024 and 7 percent from 2024 to 2025. However, in the first months of 2026, major airline hiring again began outpacing production of new qualified pilots.

Meanwhile, the post-pandemic surge in pilot certification proved temporary, as predicted. New ATP AMEL issuances fell two years running — 2025 produced 19 percent fewer than 2024 and 32 percent fewer than the 2023 peak. Early 2026 data points to a modest rebound: a 12-month rolling average projects full-year output of roughly 7,984, above 2025 but still below the 2022 pace and well short of the 2023 peak. While an influx of displaced Spirit pilots and other conditions may continue to ease pressure this year, they do not solve the long-term imbalance.

Figure 7. Major Carrier Hiring vs. Qualified Pilot Production[4]

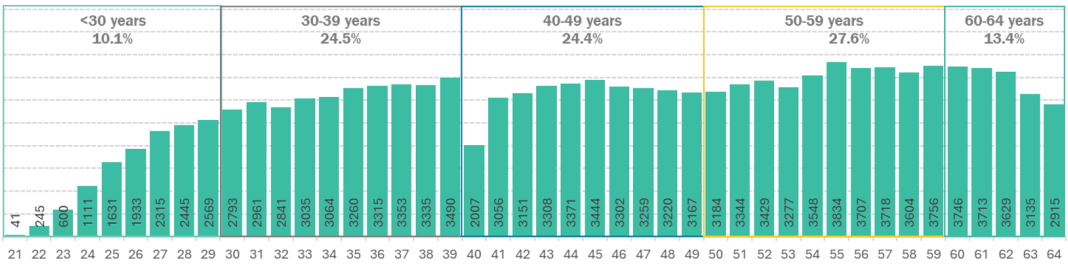


New pilot certification numbers also need careful interpretation. Since March 2020, 49,671 new ATP AMEL certificates have been issued, yet there are just 17,403 more ATP AMEL pilots in today's qualified pilot pool. In other words, only one in three new ATP certificates was net growth in the pilot pool.

Figure 8. ATP-Certified Pilot Retirement Outlook

Data files distributed monthly by Registry Services & Information Management Branch, AFB-730, Federal Aviation Administration

[4] FAA Registry: AFB-730, Federal Aviation Administration; Hiring data: fapa.aero/pilot-hiring-history



Workforce demand has also evolved. Airlines now keep larger reserve staffing pools to cover weather, maintenance, illness, or other disruptions even when they are not scheduled to fly a particular trip. Training duties draw pilots out of revenue service for initial training, upgrades, recurrent training, instructor duties, and check airman responsibilities. And when aircraft are scheduled less intensively, the airline may need more aircraft and crew resources to produce the same number of trips due to increased non-productive time. Together, these changes mean the industry must produce more pilots just to sustain a level of service that once required fewer.

Fleet modernization is also central to small-community connectivity.

While the pilot shortage was the dominant constraint reshaping regional aviation over the last decade, the aircraft available to serve smaller markets also changed significantly as older regional aircraft aged and replacement options became increasingly limited.

Scope Clause Constraints

Regional airlines and their major airline partners have operated for years within a constrained aircraft environment shaped by scope clauses in major airline pilot-union contracts, which cap regional aircraft at 50, 70, or 76 seats, with an 86,000-lb takeoff weight limit. Today's most advanced, fuel-efficient jets have cleaner-burning, more efficient engines, which are heavier. The added weight causes modern regional jets to exceed the weight limits of every major airline scope clause.

This has effectively frozen regional fleets at older propulsion technology and has deterred the broader development of next-generation regional aircraft outright. Aircraft manufacturers respond rationally to the market available to them. The United States is the largest regional jet market, and all regional flying operates under scope clause restrictions. Saab, Bombardier, British Aerospace, Beech, Fairchild-Dornier, and most recently Mitsubishi have all stopped investing in new regional aircraft, citing scope as the primary reason.[5] The result is a structural gap in the regional fleet at exactly the aircraft size small communities need.

When airlines cannot access the right aircraft for the mission, the system tends to upgauge. That often means less frequency, fewer destinations, and reduced practical connectivity for some smaller communities. But larger, 76-seat aircraft are not a universal substitute for smaller regional aircraft: scope limitations restrict how many may be operated, and runway constraints, airport infrastructure, market size, and operating economics make them unsuitable for some communities, which simply lose air service altogether.

In fact, many communities would be well-served by aircraft that fall between the smallest commercial aircraft and larger regional jets, particularly in the 19- to 30-seat range, yet the range of aircraft available in that segment has

[5] *Leeham News, "The regional market and scope clauses" (Jan. 18, 2017); Reuters, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, "Notice of Discontinuation of SpaceJet Development Activities" (Feb. 7, 2023); Bombardier, "Bombardier Concludes Sale of the CRJ Series Regional Jet Program to Mitsubishi Heavy Industries" (June 1, 2020); Saab, "Saab 340B"; Aviation Week, "BAE Systems Cancels RJX" (Nov. 28, 2001); Forecast International, "Beech 1900" (Aug. 2003), "The Future of Regional Jets Dims as Mitsubishi Walks Away" (Feb. 2016), et al.*

narrowed considerably over time. Emerging technologies may help in the future, but communities facing air service challenges today need aircraft that are available, certifiable, and economically viable now.

Scope is a private-sector constraint with public-interest consequences. While we recognize that Congress does not dictate private contracts, scope clause constraints deserve greater attention in any serious discussion of small-community air service. They limit the industry's ability to modernize the regional fleet, improve fuel efficiency, reduce emissions, and serve small and rural routes with right-sized aircraft. Communities feel the consequences when the aircraft needed to serve them are no longer being built.

Policy and the Aviation Workforce

RAA is grateful for this Committee's leadership on aviation workforce development, as well as your support for initiatives designed to strengthen aviation career pathways earlier in the education process.

Pilot training is particularly expensive because flight education requires aircraft, fuel, maintenance, insurance, simulators, instructors, and FAA-regulated training infrastructure. These are not ordinary classroom costs. Flight training alone routinely costs well into six figures, and when combined with a degree program can leave students facing $200,000 or more in total education and training costs. While federal student aid can be used for accredited flight education programs, current loan limits were not designed to meet these costs, which exceed current federal student loan limits by roughly $80,000 on average, even where students are enrolled in accredited training programs and even where airlines provide substantial financing support and subsidy. Students using student loans will exhaust available financing long before completing the certifications and ratings necessary to enter the profession. For students without family wealth or access to private credit, that gap can be decisive. Capable young people are blocked from high-wage, high-demand aviation careers for no other reason than they cannot finance their education.

Access to a pilot career should be determined by ability, discipline, and commitment, not family wealth or private financing. Congress has recognized this problem before, and bipartisan lawmakers and aviation stakeholders urged the Department of Education, through its RISE rulemaking, to make a targeted fix to increase federal loan access for flight education. Unfortunately, the Department declined to make changes to any program. RAA therefore asks Congress to send a clear signal through flight education access legislation aligning federal student aid with the real cost of accredited flight training.

Veterans also represent an important aviation workforce pathway. Yet current GI Bill rules often prevent veterans from using earned educational benefits for all phases of training required to become professional pilots. RAA supports modernizing GI Bill eligibility so veterans can fully utilize earned benefits throughout the professional pilot training pathway, including for the private pilot certificate, which serves as the entry point to professional pilot training.

The aviation maintenance workforce requires sustained attention as well. Aircraft maintenance technicians are foundational to aviation safety and operational reliability, and workforce shortages in maintenance increasingly affect aircraft utilization, operational resilience, and smaller-community connectivity.

The *FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024* took important steps to strengthen aviation maintenance workforce development through expanded grant eligibility and support for technician pipeline programs. Congress should continue building on that foundation through sustained funding, expanded testing access, stronger STEM integration, and policies that help veterans transition into civilian maintenance careers.

RAA also supports raising the mandatory pilot retirement age to 67. The pilot retirement age was last raised in 2007 to age 65 with no negative safety impact. Raising it again would not solve the pilot shortage alone, but it would help preserve experienced aviators, soften near-term retirement pressure, and give the training pipeline more time to catch up. Canada, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Argentina, the UK, and IATA are leading the effort at the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). The U.S., one of ICAO's largest members, should retake our leadership mantle.

Pilot Training Advancement

The industry needs a healthy pilot supply, and even more importantly, safety depends on pilots being prepared for the demands of modern commercial airline operations. RAA was pleased to see the FAA advance the Congressionally directed Enhanced Qualification Program (EQP) last month, reflecting the first material update to first officer training and qualifications since 2013. We applaud the FAA for moving this important safety work forward. As aircraft, technology, and operating environments continue to evolve, training and qualification pathways must keep pace. Complacency is not compatible with aviation safety.

Today, many pilots complete highly structured foundational training and then spend a year or more accumulating additional aeronautical experience before entering airline training. During that period, pilots can spend extended time away from the structured, scenario-based, crew-oriented training environment. Airlines have responded by expanding portions of initial training when pilots arrive with less recency of structured training.

The EQP builds on these solutions by implementing recommendations from the FAA's Air Carrier Training Aviation Rulemaking Committee (ACT ARC), an expert ARC charged with evaluating how pilot training can better prepare pilots for modern airline operations. As described in the FAA's draft Advisory Circular, the EQP is designed for pilots seeking a Restricted Airline Transport Pilot certificate and includes substantial prerequisites, rigorous pilot assessment, and intensive integrated academic and flight training.

The safety value of the EQP lies in the quality, relevance, and rigor of the training itself. The FAA should implement the program through clear, standardized guidance that provides carriers and training providers with consistent expectations, including how aeronautical experience credit is earned and applied. Consistent implementation standards will help ensure safety advancement, while ensuring the pathway can be adopted and administered as Congress and the FAA intended.

ATC Modernization and Safety Enhancements for All Airports and Airspace

As a proud member of the Modern Skies Coalition, RAA strongly supports the historic investments Congress has made in ATC modernization this year and urges additional funding to complete the job. Replacing aging infrastructure, improving communications resiliency, installing modern surface awareness tools, and rebuilding the controller workforce are all essential steps toward strengthening the national airspace system. Because our members operate at more airports and in more categories of airspace than any other commercial airline sector, we hold a uniquely comprehensive view of the modernization needs in every category of airspace.

Recent attention to aviation safety has understandably focused on high-profile events near major metropolitan airports. But risk in the national airspace system is not confined to large hubs. Every day, our members provide air service to mixed-use airports, contract tower airports, limited-service airports, and non-towered operational environments that still lack situational-awareness tools that are standard elsewhere in the system.

RAA urges Congress to ensure modernization does not stop at the largest hubs. We strongly support a comprehensive approach to modernization and small-airport safety enhancement that reaches every part of the

system serving commercial passengers. That includes equipping smaller and rural airports with practical situational-awareness tools, modernizing contract towers that currently lack radar capability, strengthening communications infrastructure, and improving surface-detection and traffic-awareness technologies.

RAA specifically supports deployment of Airborne Position Reference Tools (APRT) and similar ADS-B-based situational awareness technologies at contract towers that currently operate without radar displays. Many regional airline operations occur at airports where controllers are providing commercial traffic separation without access to the same tools available elsewhere in the system. H.R. 8597, the Air Traffic Situational Awareness Enhancement Act, is bipartisan legislation sponsored by Congressman Nick Begich (R-AK) and Congresswoman Laura Gillen (D-NY) that would require the FAA to install APRT at contract towers that lack advanced situational awareness systems, establish controller training requirements, authorize funding for the technology, and reimburse airports that have already invested in APRT systems. RAA urges Committee members to support H.R. 8597 and advocate for the inclusion of this important safety measure in legislation moving forward.

RAA also supports improving operational awareness and communication standards at non-towered airports serving commercial traffic. Clear communication over Common Traffic Advisory Frequency (CTAF) can materially improve situational awareness in mixed-traffic environments where commercial aircraft, general aviation aircraft, military operations, medical flights, and other users may all be operating simultaneously. Today, pilots in Class D and E airspace are recommended, but not required, to communicate their position when operating near or at non-towered, mixed-use airports. This has led to close-proximity events requiring evasive maneuvers when pilots have failed to communicate their position. RAA supports legislative direction to require such CTAF communication.

Beyond this specific gap, RAA urges Congress to extend federal safety reviews to the airports where mixed-traffic risk is present. Many airports with scheduled commercial service handle a substantial mix of commercial, general aviation, business, and military traffic. Many are non-towered, and some towered airports operate without radar, ADS-B In, or other situational-awareness tools.

Modernization should also include practical pathways for implementing advanced safety technologies across regional fleets, including deployment of advanced collision-avoidance technologies across the National Airspace System. RAA applauds both the House-passed ALERT Act and the Senate-passed ROTOR Act and appreciates the leadership of the committees that advanced these important safety initiatives. Both bills recognize the value of expanding situational awareness and collision-avoidance capabilities following the tragic midair collision near Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport. While the two bills take different approaches, the House proposal merits special recognition for addressing the full range of National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) safety recommendations and charting a path toward broader deployment of advanced collision-avoidance technology.

ADS-B In and ACAS-X serve different but complementary safety functions. ADS-B In improves pilot situational awareness by providing better information about nearby traffic and airport-surface activity. ACAS-X builds on that foundation by providing automated collision-avoidance protection. We believe ACAS-X presents the stronger safety advantage and represents the future of collision-avoidance protection for the commercial fleet.

Achieving that objective requires a realistic implementation pathway. ACAS-X depends on ADS-B In, and both technologies require aircraft-specific product development, certification, integration, installation, testing, and training. For the regional fleet, integrated ADS-B In solutions are still being developed, just as ACAS-X solutions are still being developed. These are not simple software updates. Many regional aircraft were not originally designed around these systems, and integration, panel space, avionics architecture, aircraft-specific engineering, and supply-chain constraints can all affect deployment timelines. Those factors are outside carrier control.

At the same time, meaningful safety improvements can and should begin immediately. Electronic Flight Bag-based ADS-B In solutions can provide weather and traffic situational awareness at all altitudes, visual and aural conflict alerting, and runway and surface awareness almost immediately. EFBs are FAA-approved, proven, and scalable, and pilots are trained and proficient on their applications. Aircraft may not take off without a fully functional EFB in the flight deck. While we believe EFB solutions should not replace integrated tools on a permanent basis, deploying them as a time-limited bridge today will produce meaningful safety improvement almost immediately while aircraft-specific ADS-B In and ACAS-X systems are developed. RAA asks that Congress and the FAA require a time-limited means of compliance through these near-term capabilities. We additionally ask that Congress require all aircraft, including military, business, and general aviation, to use this technology at all times, with reasonable, narrow exceptions for genuine national security concerns.

Figure 9. Electronic Flight Bag Mounted in CRJ700 Aircraft

As ROTOR and ALERT move toward conference, it is important that the final law delivers both immediate safety benefits and a full integration timeline grounded in certification, engineering, and supply-chain realities. Those factors are outside carrier control and cannot be solved by operator effort alone. An unworkable safety or fleet mandate can unintentionally reduce the small-community air service Congress is trying to protect. At the same time, the challenge of getting the pathway right should not become a reason to delay or abandon these safety improvements. Congress can and should conference and pass a final collision-avoidance bill that delivers real, deployable safety benefits across the system.

Essential Air Service

In 1978, Congress established the Essential Air Service (EAS) program to preserve scheduled air service to small and isolated communities in a deregulated market. Nearly five decades later, that need has not disappeared and the program continues to maintain a safeguard for many communities that would otherwise lose access to the national air transportation system. EAS is also a proven economic force multiplier. Before the pandemic,

commercial air service at EAS airports generated approximately $2.3 billion in economic activity and supported more than 17,000 jobs nationwide.[6]

We appreciate this Committee's longstanding, bipartisan support for the program and note that the House's Fiscal Year 2027 THUD bill again fully funds EAS. RAA urges committee members to support final passage of a Transportation appropriations bill that maintains full funding for the program.

The experience of the past several years demonstrates both the value and the limits of EAS. The program helped preserve a baseline of connectivity for many communities that would have lost scheduled air service entirely during a period of intense disruption. But EAS communities were not immune to pilot shortages, reliability challenges, carrier exits, service gaps, or difficult transitions. That experience underscores the importance of protecting, fully funding, and administering the program in ways that support stable, reliable service.

Most EAS contracts are awarded for a fixed term, often two years, with the Department of Transportation (DOT) setting a subsidy rate for that period. That structure preserves competition and lets communities and DOT revisit service options, but short terms can be challenging given the substantial startup costs described earlier, which a carrier must absorb before service can begin in a smaller market. Longer contract terms can help carriers spread those fixed costs over a more realistic period and give communities greater continuity. However, longer terms work best when contracts account for changing operating conditions. Fuel, labor, and other costs can increase significantly during the life of a contract. While Congress has previously authorized DOT to adjust EAS rates when those increases occur, our understanding is that it has not been meaningfully used in practice.

Our members have also identified the timing of DOT contract awards and carrier transitions as an area where the program could be improved. Prolonged bidding timelines create uncertainty for communities and carriers, particularly when transitions are anticipated in advance, but decisions are delayed. Timely contract awards and well-managed transitions help communities and carriers plan effectively and reduce the risk of service disruptions.

EAS works best when carriers can plan responsibly, communities can rely on continuity, and contract structures reflect the real costs of providing safe, reliable air service in smaller markets. Continued congressional funding remains the foundation of that stability, and RAA will continue to be a strong ally in protecting and strengthening the program.

Not every struggling community can participate in EAS, so we believe Congress should continue to explore programs to support vulnerable communities that fall outside existing programs.

Small Community Air Service Development Program

One such tool is the Small Community Air Service Development Program (SCASDP), which helps communities, airports, airlines, and local stakeholders work together to attract, restore, and strengthen air service. Communities have used the program to support route development, marketing initiatives, revenue guarantees, and other partnerships that improve the viability of local air service. Its flexibility allows communities to pursue solutions tailored to their geographic, economic, and operational circumstances.

The *FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024* increased authorized funding for SCASDP to $15 million annually and directed DOT to prioritize communities that have experienced reductions in air service. That focus is well placed. The SCASDP program helps communities and airlines work together to prove a market, allowing stakeholders to share risk, build demand, and address connectivity challenges.

[6] Lindemuth et al., Small Community Airports.

Congress should consider whether additional funding would allow more communities to participate in this promising program, and whether funding levels have kept pace with rising costs associated with initiating new air service. Additionally, Congress might consider longer grants that would provide more time to allow markets to mature. While SCASDP helps communities prove and build a market, service can falter when grants end, if the underlying economics remain fragile. Congress should examine whether a brief funding extension, stronger transition tools, or other targeted supports could help communities sustain service after a grant period ends.

State and Local Partnership Models

Several states have experimented with innovative public-private partnership models to support air service development. Wyoming and New Mexico, for example, have used programs that help communities and states share a portion of the financial risk associated with launching or rebuilding service. These approaches recognize that establishing service in a smaller market often requires time for passenger demand to mature. While not every route succeeds, risk-sharing models can help communities compete for service and create opportunities for markets to demonstrate their long-term viability.

The Path Forward

Regional airlines have adapted through repeated periods of disruption, and air service has begun to recover in many places. But rural America still does not have the connectivity it needs.

Regional airlines remain critical to restoring reliable access to the national air transportation system, and success in that effort will require continued commitment to aviation safety, a strong aviation workforce, modern infrastructure, and aircraft suited to smaller markets. Congress has an important role in each of these areas and the choices you make, as you lay the groundwork for the next FAA Reauthorization, will help determine whether small and rural communities can regain and sustain meaningful air service in the years ahead.

RAA appreciates the Committee's focus on rural connectivity and hopes you will continue to view us as a committed partner in advocating for these communities.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to your questions.