

**STATEMENT OF MICHAEL WHITAKER  
ADMINISTRATOR, FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION  
HEARING BEFORE THE UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION  
THE STATE OF AMERICAN AVIATION AND  
THE FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION  
FEBRUARY 6, 2024**

Chairs Graves and Graves, Ranking Members Larsen and Cohen, and members of the subcommittee thank you for the opportunity to be here with you today for the first time as the Administrator of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to discuss the agency's priorities and my initial observations within the agency.

The agency's number one priority is safety. We must continuously be proactive, consistent, and deliberative executing our mission to maintain and build on the agency's safety record. Since being sworn in as the FAA Administrator on October 25, 2023, I have worked to ensure that we remain solely focused on our mission. Upon joining the agency, I began a process of renewed focus on potential risks to the National Airspace System (NAS), initially targeting three specific areas: first, significant safety events, including close calls and runway incursions, and related safety events; second, air traffic controller workforce issues including fatigue and the workforce shortage; and third, continuous safety improvement.

**Significant Safety Events**

*Close Calls, Runway Incursions, and Related Safety Events*

My initial area of inquiry was around the close calls, runway incursions, and related safety events that occurred in 2023.

Focus on these events began in March of last year when Acting Administrator Billy Nolen convened more than 200 leaders from across the aviation industry to examine ways to prevent future occurrences. That summit resulted in a variety of concrete actions and a commitment from the FAA and the aviation community to collaborate on the goal of reaching zero significant close calls.

Following the summit, the FAA moved swiftly, taking several actions to enhance flight safety and reduce incursions by providing more controller training and supervision as well providing pilot and operator outreach and training. In 2023, the FAA held over 100 runway safety meetings at airports with control towers to identify and address airport-specific risks. Also, the FAA tasked the Investigative Technologies Aviation Rulemaking Committee (ARC) to recommend new technologies, such as cockpit alerting systems, to reduce runway safety events. I expect the ARC to submit an interim recommendation report later this year.

Additionally, the FAA named an independent National Airspace Safety Review Team to examine ways to enhance safety and reliability in the nation's air traffic system. The team examined the FAA's internal safety processes, staffing levels, practices, facilities and equipment, and how the agency's air traffic budget is funded. I received the independent report on November 15, 2023. Two days later, I took immediate action on their recommendations including several that provide resources to assist air traffic controllers, such as deploying tower simulator training systems in 95 facilities by December 2025. On January 29, the agency installed the first system at Austin-Bergstrom International Airport.

These technology investments will continue to be an effective mechanism to enhance aviation safety, in particular, runway safety. We are committed to continue to develop, test, and deploy technologies to improve surface surveillance and situational awareness for controllers, flight crews, and ground personnel through a variety of means, including surface lighting, visual and aural alerts, and enhanced displays. Over the last several years, the FAA has researched and issued standards for both Runway Incursion Warning Systems (RIWS) and Vehicle Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast (ADS-B) emitters to help combat Vehicle/ Pedestrian Deviations (VPDs). RIWS and vehicle ADS-B transmitters are available for installation on airport and airline-owned ground vehicles that regularly operate in the movement area. These technologies enhance situational awareness for surface operators and Air Traffic Controllers. The FAA has been actively encouraging airports to voluntarily equip their vehicles and grants are available through the FAA Office of Airports. As a result, there are now over 2,100 vehicles equipped with ADS-B transmitters and over 1,000 vehicles equipped with a RIWS.

Moreover, the FAA continues to focus on airport infrastructure improvements to address airfield geometry issues, a significant contributing factor for many runway incursions. The Runway Incursion Mitigation (RIM) Program is at the forefront of industry and FAA partnerships in mitigating airport locations with a history of runway incursions. To date, this work has achieved a 70 percent overall reduction at more than 100 locations. Because of their high safety impact, the FAA prioritizes funding RIM projects through its competitive grant programs. We appreciate the funding Congress has provided through the Airport Improvement Program, Supplemental Discretionary Grant Program, and the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to achieve these critical safety improvements.

The FAA also continues to evaluate runway safety areas (RSAs) and works with airport operators to improve RSAs that do not meet federal standards. RSAs enhance the safety of aircraft that undershoot, overrun, or veer off a runway. The FAA previously assessed all RSAs serving air carrier runways at the nation's commercial airports and is now focused on determining the RSA status of general aviation airports. The FAA also continues to work closely with industry and other Federal agencies to address and reduce the risks associated with wildlife hazards.

Since the beginning of fiscal year (FY) 2023, the FAA has awarded 57 grants for runway safety projects under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and 154 runway safety projects under the Airport Improvement Program, totaling more than \$1 billion. These projects will install airfield lighting, signage, and markings, as well as reconfigure and construct new taxiways to enhance safety on the airfield.

Overall, our data shows a recent downward trend in the rate of runway incursions. We are optimistic that our recent and ongoing work and collaboration with industry will lead to continued safety improvements. But to drive the number of runway incursions to zero, we must continue to focus on and invest in this priority.

### **Controller Workforce**

The safety of the United States aviation system is due in large part to our skilled and dedicated air traffic controllers. To maintain our safety record, the agency must accelerate the pace of

recruiting, training, and hiring to meet increasing volume and safely integrate new entrants in the NAS.

The President's FY 2024 budget request includes funding for the hiring and training of 1,800 controllers, an increase of 300 controllers as compared to the hiring level for FY 2023. This funding also supports the continued training of the 1,500 controllers hired in FY 2023. We have 2,716 trainees making their way through the system right now, and nearly 1,600 of these trainees are partially certified to work an air traffic control position, adding capacity to support operations. The budget request will allow the FAA to continue progress toward attaining the necessary Certified Professional Controller staffing levels to meet current traffic demands, which have returned to, and in some markets exceeded, pre-pandemic levels.

To increase this pipeline of new controllers, we are working with colleges and universities in the Air Traffic-Collegiate Training Initiative (AT-CTI) to expand their curriculums so that AT-CTI schools can offer training that is equivalent to the FAA Academy. Once implemented, graduates of the FAA-approved AT-CTI programs will still need to pass the Air Traffic Skills Assessment exam, be selected for employment by the FAA, and meet medical and security requirements. If hired as trainees, these graduates will be able to move directly to on-the-job training at the start of their employment instead of attending the FAA Air Traffic Controller Academy before being assigned to a facility as required today.

Similarly, we have launched several other initiatives to increase controller hiring:

- Initiating a year-round hiring track for experienced controllers from the military and private industry.
- Filling every seat at the FAA Academy and increasing our classroom capacity.
- Finishing the deployment of upgraded tower simulation systems (software and hardware) in 95 facilities by December 2025. As I mentioned earlier, the FAA deployed the first upgraded system in Austin last month. These tower simulation systems will help address staffing shortages by reducing time to certification by 27 percent for new hires and 21 percent for Certified Professional Controllers in Training.

Increasing our controller ranks will help mitigate risks associated with controller fatigue resulting from shifting schedules and excessive overtime. During my first three months at the agency, I met with air traffic controllers in Boston, Philadelphia, Dallas, and Washington, D.C. to get their perspective on issues facing the workforce. Controller fatigue came up repeatedly, which is why the agency established a panel of fatigue experts to study the issue. The panel will examine how the latest science on sleep needs and fatigue considerations could be applied to controller work requirements and scheduling. We look forward to receiving their report in the coming weeks.

### **Continuous Safety Improvement**

As we learned from the tragic accidents of Lion Air Flight 610 in 2018 and Ethiopian Airlines Flight 302 in 2019, we must continuously improve and reexamine processes and accepted procedures that support our safety mission by continuing to gather and use data to detect risks, simulate outcomes, optimize the agency's safety decision-making, challenge our organizational structures and assumptions, and introduce more transparency in how we do business.

My commitment to continuous improvement begins by looking internally within the FAA and is reflected in a number of actions we have taken over the last three months, including the following:

- To further strengthen our safety culture and the connection between the Air Traffic Safety Oversight Service (AOV) and the ATO, and consistent with the Safety Review Team recommendations, I realigned the AOV Executive Director to report to both the Associate Administrator for Aviation Safety and directly to me. AOV is responsible for directing independent, risk-based, data-driven safety oversight of air navigation services provided by the Air Traffic Organization. Direct, candid feedback is crucial to aviation safety, and that is why I have provided a direct line from the person who independently assesses the safety of air navigation services to the Administrator.
- I chartered the Mental Health and Aviation Medical Clearances Aviation Rulemaking Committee (ARC). This ARC is comprised of members of the aviation and medical communities. It is intended to provide a forum for discussion among such communities and provide recommendations to the FAA that break down the barriers that prevent pilots and air traffic controllers from reporting and seeking care for mental health issues. The same disclosure issues exist for pilots and air traffic controllers and can impact safety. I expect the ARC to submit its report to me this spring.
- We proposed requiring certificated repair stations located outside the United States whose employees perform safety-sensitive maintenance functions on certain air carrier aircraft to obtain and implement a drug and alcohol testing program. These programs

would align with the FAA and Department of Transportation (DOT)'s drug and alcohol standards.

- I am exploring how the agency can better collect and utilize safety data. We are assessing tools, techniques, and processes that will better identify and mitigate risk in the NAS.

### **Alaska Airlines Flight 1282 and Boeing Production Problems**

On January 5, the left mid-cabin door plug blew out of Alaska Airlines Flight 1282. The next day, on January 6, the FAA issued an emergency airworthiness directive grounding all 737-9 MAX aircraft with the door plug configuration.

We then approved a thorough inspection and maintenance process that was performed on each of the grounded aircraft before returning to service. Our findings during inspections of those aircraft showed that the quality system issues at Boeing were unacceptable and require further scrutiny.

That is why we are increasing oversight activities including:

- Capping expanded production of new Boeing 737 MAX aircraft to ensure accountability and full compliance with required quality control procedures.
- Launching an investigation scrutinizing Boeing's compliance with manufacturing requirements. The FAA will consider the full extent of its enforcement authority to ensure the company is held accountable for any non-compliance.
- Aggressively expanding oversight of new aircraft with increased floor presence at all Boeing facilities.
- Closely monitoring data to identify and mitigate significant safety trends and risks in the system.

- Launching an analysis of potential safety-focused reforms around quality control and delegation.

As we increase our oversight of Boeing, we also look forward to the results of the Boeing Safety Culture Review report, which will inform the agency regarding future action. Required by the Aircraft Certification, Safety and Accountability Act, the review panel included representatives from NASA, the FAA, labor unions, independent engineering experts, air carriers, manufacturers with delegated authority, legal experts, and others. The panel has been reviewing thousands of documents, interviewed more than 250 Boeing employees, managers, and executives, Boeing supplier employees, and FAA employees and visited several Boeing sites as well as Spirit AeroSystems' (a subcontractor for Boeing) facility in Wichita.

Let me stress: we will follow the data and take appropriate and necessary action. The safety of the flying public will continue to inform our decision-making. We will continue to implement the Aircraft Certification, Safety, and Accountability Act as recent events underscore the importance of continuously looking for ways to improve and refine safety oversight activities.

Additionally, the FAA has been working closely with the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) to support their investigation of the incident. We will take further safety actions based on the findings, as necessary.

### **National Outreach Program for Diversity and Inclusion**

Before I close, I would like to address inaccurate reporting related to the FAA's National Outreach Program for Diversity and Inclusion. Congress enacted equal employment opportunity

laws years ago, and we comply with them. Let me be clear—all FAA employees contribute to our safety mission. The FAA employs tens of thousands of people for a wide range of positions, from administrative roles, like a clerical assistant, to oversight and execution of critical safety functions, like an air traffic controller. Like many large employers, the agency seeks qualified candidates from as many sources as possible, all of whom must meet rigorous qualifications that of course vary by position. These policies go back over several bipartisan administrations. Any statements to the contrary are misleading. The FAA must follow the law in its hiring practices. It does and will continue to do so as long as I am honored to lead the agency.

### **Closing Observations**

In the three months since I have been back at the FAA, I have reaffirmed that our employees are our most important asset. I have met with the FAA employees who work daily to carry out the agency's mission. I saw first-hand their professionalism and commitment, and I hold them in the highest regard.

Notably, I began my tenure as FAA Administrator shortly before the busiest time of the year for air travel, and 2023 was also the busiest year for air travel ever. I saw firsthand the steadfast professionalism of our controllers as I visited various FAA facilities during the holiday season. They worked around the clock so that passengers were safe from takeoff to touchdown, and it is because of them that travel during the holiday season was notably smooth. From Sunday, December 17, 2023, to Monday, January 1, 2024, the cancellation rate was just 0.8 percent despite a record number of passengers flying during the busy holiday season. The cancellation

rate during that same period in 2022 was 8.2 percent. Taking a broader view, in 2023, there were 16.3 million flights and a cancellation rate below 1.2 percent, the lowest rate in a decade.

I appreciate the opportunity to serve as Administrator of the FAA, and I am confident in the FAA's ability to address the challenges ahead. I also want to express the Administration's support for the enactment of a long-term FAA reauthorization bill and commend the bipartisan efforts in the House to complete this important work. I look forward to working with Congress as it considers the Administration's recently submitted views and finalizes the FAA reauthorization bill.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.