

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE J. LYNN HELMS, FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON POST OFFICE & CIVIL SERVICE, CONCERNING REBUILDING OF THE AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL SYSTEM. OCTOBER 6, 1981.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I welcome the opportunity to appear before the Committee today to discuss the FAA's rebuilding of the air traffic control system. I am aware of the Committee's long-standing interest in personnel issues within the FAA and look forward to working with you and receiving your support as we continue rebuilding the air traffic control system.

Before touching on the personnel issues which are of most direct interest to this Committee, I want to give my unqualified endorsement of the current safety of our air traffic system. Current system users are virtually unanimous in that view as well. My confidence in the safety of the system, though, is not based solely on information we receive from those who use the system. I have travelled to a large number of facilities since the strike to see firsthand how the air traffic system is operating. I receive daily reports on incidents which have occurred and a weekly summary is prepared highlighting reported incidents with the system's operation for the same dates a year ago. The FAA has also intensified its aviation safety surveillance by placing special emphasis on air

traffic control operations. Additionally, from recommendations received from Mr. Burton's hearings, we have expanded both our data sources and our emphasis on incident reporting. Through this intensified surveillance, such as observing the safety of the air traffic control operations from FAA aircraft and the "jump seat" on commercial airlines, our aviation safety inspectors and evaluators have been uniquely situated to observe the interaction between controllers and pilots. In addition, these same aviation safety inspectors and evaluators have directly observed air traffic control operations in key FAA field facilities throughout the country, and interviewed pilots and aircraft operators from all segments of aviation. These aviation safety inspections and observations from these different vantage points have resulted in several thousand reports, which clearly demonstrate that the system is being operated safely. To date, all information I have received shows the system is every bit as safe as it was before the strike. I don't want to imply that the system is perfect -- it is not. We continue to experience operational errors and reported near mid-air collisions, but the rate at which these events are occurring is substantially less than what we experienced one year ago.

To keep the system operating safely, we have placed constraints on traffic volume consistent with staffing levels. The essence of our interim operating plan is the requirement on the airlines to reduce a percentage of flights at 22 major airports during peak hours. That reduction balances workload with staffing. Consequently, with substantially reduced staffing levels, we have been able to safely handle from 75 to 80 percent of the normal scheduled aircraft movement within the air traffic system. With few exceptions, aircraft delays have occurred on the ground rather than in the air. We regret the delays on the ground since we would obviously prefer no delays; however, taking the delays on the ground reduces the fuel consumption otherwise experienced from airborne delays. Moreover, keeping the aircraft on the ground in these instances provides for proper spacing of aircraft and reduces the need to "stack" aircraft which could intensify facility workload.

Current traffic levels (i.e., about 75-80 percent of normal scheduled traffic) will likely be maintained throughout the spring and summer of next year. Adding newly trained controllers and flight data specialists will serve in the short term to lessen work hours and permit vacation time to be scheduled. I should add that we have already taken action to limit our employee's work schedules. We have no employees

working scheduled work weeks in excess of 48 hours a week, and, in fact, many are at the normal 40 hours. In the second year of rebuilding the system, we expect to permit traffic levels to increase at a steady pace to the point at which pre-strike traffic levels can be reached on a daily basis. We will still flow control traffic at that point to assure that prior peak traffic levels will not be reached until the system is fully capable. Toward the end of the third year of rebuilding the system, we expect to have attained recovery of full capacity and to be able to safely handle previous peak hour traffic activity and even slightly more.

I'd like to turn now to some of the personnel issues in which the Committee is interested. First I want to stress that all our working controllers engaged in control of aircraft, whether civilian, military, or supervisory personnel, are fully qualified and certified to perform the work assigned them. They are qualified both medically and operationally, and all individuals controlling traffic are certified by the FAA on each position of operation prior to their assuming duties at that position. Military controllers are given the same sector training and checkout that would be provided to a similarly experienced FAA employee transferring into the facility.

The Committee has been provided substantial details concerning staffing levels and the like. Rather than duplicate all that information, I will briefly highlight the kinds of personnel actions we have taken to keep the system operating efficiently while we rebuild our workforce, and the steps we are taking to effect that rebuilding.

As an interim measure, we have temporarily relocated some employees for 90-120 day periods to facilities where inadequate staff remained after the strike to continue the effective operation of the facility. We have also temporarily relocated some employees, on a voluntary basis, to busier facilities from which they had previously transferred and in which they could rapidly be retrained and certified. We have also reassigned employees from temporarily closed towers to more critical facilities. Our controller workforce at our terminals and centers has been supplemented temporarily with military controllers. More are in the process of coming aboard. We have also reappointed former FAA controllers who had previously resigned or retired. At the end of September, we had reemployed 241 annuitants who were retired controllers and air traffic supervisors.

Also, to provide short-term relief in our busier facilities, we are hiring individuals in newly created positions of flight data specialists. These positions do not entail controlling traffic and will relieve our working controllers of supporting functions such as distributing flight data strips and operating simulator training equipment. We expect to hire nearly 1,500 flight data specialists before the end of this year.

It is apparent, though, that these are only interim measures until we have restaffed our air traffic controller workforce. So far, over 125,000 people have applied for employment as air traffic controllers. That provides us with a pool of extremely well qualified people to choose from. These individuals will be taking the recently approved air traffic control examination about which we are very optimistic. This exam was developed over a period of 6 years by the FAA, in cooperation with the Office of Personnel Management, to comply with the uniform guidelines on employee selection procedures. We expect that the administration of this test will enable better screening of controller applicants resulting in a greater success rate in training at the Academy.

We are also boosting our instructor staffing levels at the FAA academy in Oklahoma City and expanding our capability to provide initial training to newly hired air traffic

controllers. At present, we have approximately 135 FAA instructors at the Academy and 150 instructors under contract to perform training; by mid-1982 we expect to have about 330 instructors at the Academy to provide controller training. We expect to be able to enter about 6,000 controllers for training at our Academy within a year. By the end of 1982, we project that nearly 5,000 controllers will have graduated from the Academy. In 1983, the Academy will be training about 7,000 new controllers. It will, of course, take an extended period after that training for them to become fully productive. That time-frame will vary not only by individual capability, but also by type of facility since, as the Members of the Committee are aware, we have three levels of air traffic control centers with full performance levels ranging from GS-12 to 14 and five levels of towers with full performance levels ranging from GS-10 to 14.

We have found that many developmental controllers, based on their demonstrated performance, are capable of progressing to the next higher grade level more rapidly than the Office of Personnel Management time-in-grade regulations allow. Therefore, to enable individuals to more rapidly attain the full performance level for controlling traffic, we have a training agreement approved by the Office of Personnel

Management which will allow trainees to advance when qualified and operationally certified. This training agreement is only in effect until the workforce is back to 75% of its pre-strike strength. Controllers who qualify to perform a higher level of work can now be promoted to that level without being barred by the year-in-grade requirements otherwise imposed. This will enable us to achieve greater productivity from individuals who demonstrate the capability to progress more rapidly through training and will rebuild our operating capabilities quicker. I want to emphasize, though, that we will not take any shortcuts in training. We will continue to let people only perform the level of work for which they fully qualify.

At the same time that we are working to rebuild the system, we are taking steps to assure that the management and personnel practices we undertake in our operating facilities are conducive to an improved employee-employer relationship. We have appointed a three member task force of management and labor relations experts to look at this issue and to report back to us with recommendations for improvements by early next year.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I want to emphasize to the Committee that I am not trying to paint an artificially rosy picture of how the system is operating now or how we will get it back to

its full capacity. It has not been easy for me, my staff, or our field people during the last two months. I don't expect it to be a simple task to fully restore our system to its former level of capacity. It is going to take a lot of hard work on the part of many people, and involve inconveniences and patience on the part of many more, I have previously stated this publicly. But I will guarantee you that we are not only going to get the system back to its pre-strike capacity but we are going to do it well and, most importantly, safely. Having seen the outstanding performance of FAA employees preparing for the possibility of a strike, and then during and after the strike, I have the utmost confidence in our ability to rebuild the system.

That completes my prepared statement. I would be pleased to respond to questions you may have at this time.