STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE J. LYNN HELMS, FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT OPERATIONS, SUBCOMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT ACTIVITIES AND TRANSPORTATION, CONCERNING REBUILDING OF THE AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL SYSTEM. SEPTEMBER 9, 1981.

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee today, along with Secretary Lewis, to discuss the rebuilding of the air traffic control system.

As Secretary Lewis has emphasized already to the Subcommittee, our prime concern as we work to rebuild the system is the safety of the travelling public. We have not nor will we take any actions which will degrade or compromise in any manner the safety of our air transportation system. Not only are the Secretary and I fully committed to the safety of the system, but I assure you the professionals in the FAA are as well.

I would like to take a few moments to capsulize for you how the system is operating now and the kinds of steps we are taking to rebuild the system and return it to its former capacity.

SAFETY OF THE SYSTEM

Maintaining system safety is, of course, everyone's major concern. Despite the claims of others that the system is unsafe, all the evidence we have gathered indicates

convincingly that the system is every bit as safe as it was before the strike. Airline management and the pilots who are flying in the system each day substantiate the safety of the system. The Canadian government has examined the operation of our system where it interfaces with Canadian airspace and has given it a clean bill of health. A representative of the New Zealand government, and others have also certified the safety and integrity of the system. There is absolutely no question in my mind or in the minds of the FAA professionals who operate the system that our system is fully safe. I receive a system survey every morning, and I have not received a single piece of information indicating the system is not safe.

To assure that the system has operated safely, we have taken a number of steps. We have clearly chosen to constrain the volume of traffic operating within the system rather than place any possible undue strain on our operating capabilities. Staffing is monitored continuously at major towers and at the centers. Flow control restrictions are then implemented to ensure that workload is matched to the workforce at individual facilities. In fact, many of the centers are requesting that successive aircraft enter their airspace at intervals of 20 to 30 miles, thus ensuring that the controllers are not overloaded and that safety is maintained.

I also want to stress that our controllers, whether civilian, military, or supervisory personnel, are fully qualified and certified to perform the work assigned them. They are qualified both medically and operationally. 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.

Contrasting the operation of the ATC system in August this year with August 1980, shows substantial decreases in preliminary reports to the FAA of near mid-air collisions (NMAC) and the same trend with reports of operational errors (previously called system errors). Reported NMACs have dropped from 60 to 30; operational errors from 54 to 26. I also want to point out that, since August 3, we have intensified our aviation safety surveillance by placing special emphasis on air traffic control operations. 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.

CURRENT OPERATIONS

Having discussed the safety of the system, I want to focus briefly on the current level of operations. As the Subcommittee is aware, the FAA did not need to activate that part of its air traffic control contingency plan that called for a rigid airline schedule and route network. Instead, staffing levels permitted us to implement a flow control procedure that has permitted much greater capacity than the contingency plan would have permitted. We have placed a requirement on the airlines to reduce a percentage of flights at 22 major airports during peak hours to balance workload. Consequently, with substantially reduced staffing levels, we have been able to safely handle from 75 to over 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. As I indicated earlier, our choice has been to constrain the amount of traffic rather than risk any possible reduction in safety. That approach will continue.

SYSTEM 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 to busier facilities from which they had previously transferred and in which they could rapidly be retrained and certified. Our controller workforce has been supplemented temporarily with military controllers and by reappointing former FAA controllers who had previously resigned or retired.

Also, to provide short-term relief in our busier facilities, we are hiring pilots in newly created positions of flight data specialists. These positions will 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 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. I might interject at this point that over 125,000 applicants have filed for controller positions, so there is no question that we will be able to recruit highly capable and highly motivated trainees for the vacancies we have. We expect to be able to enter 5,000 to 6,000 controllers for training at our Academy within a year. It will of course take an extended period after that training to make them fully productive.

I am highly confident about our ability to expeditiously recruit and train replacements for the controllers who have been terminated. The offers of support we have received from both private and public sector organizations to help us rebuild the system have been extremely gratifying.

INCREASING SYSTEM CAPACITY

Returning the system to its pre-strike level of capacity cannot be done overnight, nor will it even be attempted. We are working diligently and methodically to systematically increase future capacity without derogation of safety.

Current traffic levels (i.e., about 75-80% of normal scheduled traffic) will likely be maintained throughout most of next year. Our recently issued regulation calls for essentially the same levels of traffic through April 1982. 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 schudules. We have no employee working a scheduled work week in excess of 48 hours, and many are at the normal 40 hours. In the second year of rebuilding the system, though, 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. 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 perhaps even slightly more.

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In closing, Mr. Chairman, I want to reemphasize my firm conviction that the safety of our air traffic system has not been derogated in any manner nor will it be as we continue to rebuild the system. We will hold airplanes on the ground as necessary to ensure complete safety in handling those aloft. We have already laid the foundation for rebuilding the system and are continuing our planning processes to ensure the timely and effective accomplishment of that objective. I am very optimistic about the future of our system and am convinced I have every reason to be that optimistic based on the enthusiasm and support the Secretary and I have received both from within and outside the FAA.

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