

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE J. LYNN HELMS, FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATOR, BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS AND TRANSPORTATION, SUBCOMMITTEE ON INVESTIGATIONS AND OVERSIGHT, CONCERNING AIR TRAFFIC SAFETY. JUNE 7, 1983.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I welcome the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee to provide the FAA's views on the safety of the air traffic control system. Through the opportunity you have afforded me today, I am hopeful that a more balanced view can be provided the public of the current safety of our air traffic system to offset the more pessimistic views contained in the National Transportation Safety Board's recent report on the air traffic system.

First, it is important to establish that the NTSB report started out by confirming the present system is safe. Only minor recognition seems to have been given to that conclusion. The major discussions center on the Board's report of "what might happen." The length of the NTSB's report and the recency of its issuance preclude a detailed analysis today. Also, since we are continuing to analyze each of the NTSB's recommendations to assure full consideration is given to them by FAA, my prepared statement will not seek to respond to those recommendations, leaving that to be handled - probably within the next 30 days - through the statutorily prescribed

channels. What I would like to address in my statement are two things. First, I'd like to briefly set out my overall views concerning the NTSB report. Second, and more important, I would like to discuss the safety of our air traffic control system, and to assure the Members of the Subcommittee and the traveling public that safety has not been compromised at any step during our rebuilding of the air traffic control system, nor will it be.

My overall opinion of the NTSB's report is that it is simply not a high quality document. The management of this investigative effort clearly suffered from a lack of scientific control over the methodology used. Throughout the report "universal" statements or findings are made based on indications received from "several" people or sources. The questionnaire process, as the NTSB itself acknowledges, was not designed to scientific standards nor properly controlled to yield valid data. Although the report claims that survey results were not "solely" relied upon in making determinations, it seems clear that they were heavily relied upon. No source is identified for the bulk of the other than survey conclusions. The report is also exceedingly untimely, representing, in my opinion, views of the performance of the air traffic control system which were incorrect not only at the

time the investigation was actually undertaken but six months later when the report was finally issued. In fact, the Board's forecast of what might happen was established in the initial report of six months ago, yet, the system remains safe today. Significantly, two Board Members found the need to file additional views. Among other things, they indicated that the "national airspace has been in the past, and continues to be, operated in a safe manner." They went on to say, and I couldn't agree more with this observation, that "the tone of the report implies a lack of safety that is not supported by objective data of the day-to-day operation of the system."

My disagreement with many aspects of the report, and the manner in which it was compiled, should not be taken, however, to mean that we are not looking closely at each recommendation in the report. We are. I welcome data from any source which may help me to make the system safer--now or in the future.

Let me turn now to the safety of the air traffic control system and to some of the actions we have taken to assure that the system has been operated safely. I want to state unequivocally that the safety levels of our air traffic control system remain as high today as they were before the strike, probably higher. Every single safety indicator points to that. Though the NTSB report has sought to call into question all the statistical

bases one might look at--operational errors, reports of near midair collisions, accidents--the fact is that there has not been one single accident investigated by the Board that has been caused by the air traffic control system since the strike. Operational errors and reports of near midair collisions both remain lower, on a constant basis, than before the strike. Although I expect and want full reporting of safety information, even if we are not getting 100 percent accurate reporting, and the NTSB concedes we weren't before the strike, I nevertheless believe there is value in these objective statistics, and that the positive message they bring should not be ignored in favor of purely subjective assessments. I think it's important to look at these data as representing trends, rather than as specific numbers, and it's also important to view these safety data in the proper context. In other words, do other means we have of looking at the system substantiate the general validity of the statistical data we are getting? The answer to that, as I will explain, is yes: every means we have of looking at the system tells us the system is working very well--not perfectly, but very well.

We use several methods to monitor the safety of our system on a continuing basis. One key way we check the operation of the system is through a constant and major evaluation effort within the agency conducted by both headquarters and regional

evaluators. Our headquarters air traffic quality assurance division conducts a wide range of on-site evaluations and monitors the system in both air carrier and private aircraft. During the year ending March 31, 1983, the division completed 20 special evaluations which included visits to 201 field facilities. In addition, 869 in-flight evaluation reports were compiled during the same period. The special evaluations concentrated on areas such as Expanded Tower En Route Control effectiveness, controller training, traffic management, flow control, new controller qualifications and competence, and safety and effectiveness of facility operations. I am at a loss as to why the Board ignored our December 22 action, in direct and very short time response to their concerns, of establishing an expanded program of senior management, specifically qualified for the task, to augment evaluations of the system. This was responsive to the suggestion that we might be in a position of being misinformed. Our direct response is a matter of factual record.

The evaluations conducted by headquarters personnel are supplemented by regional team evaluations. Each region has a separate air traffic evaluation group conducting activities similar to those of the headquarters' quality assurance division. There are 38 regional specialists engaged in these evaluation efforts. During the year ending March 31, 1983, regional evaluation teams completed 367 facility evaluations

and submitted over 1,300 in-flight evaluation reports. All regional evaluation reports are forwarded to headquarters to ensure that we stay constantly aware of the status of the whole system. These efforts disclosed no major problem areas or adverse trends developing in the system.

A moment ago, I mentioned that our air traffic evaluation specialists undertake studies on selected aspects of system operations. Let me cite one example. To crosscheck the quality of new controllers throughout the country, we undertook a special evaluation in January. We used four teams, each comprised of a controller training specialist for the facility to be visited, a controller training specialist from another region, and an evaluation specialist from Washington. These teams visited 21 facilities over a two week period and monitored the performance of 82 new controllers for a period of 2 to 3 hours each. Of these new controllers, 18 were rated "highly qualified", 63 as "qualified", and only 1 as "questionable". The one rated "questionable" reviewed the recording of the monitored session with his supervisor, received counseling on his shortcomings, and was determined to be satisfactory when given another over-the-shoulder recertification. The results of this survey, ranking 98% of the new controllers in the "qualified" or "highly qualified" category, tell me we must be doing something right in recruiting and training new controllers.

As another means of information and, in a sense, a check and balance on the air traffic system by FAA employees who do not work in air traffic control, the FAA uses flight operations and airworthiness inspectors, whose job it is to continually perform surveillance of in-flight operations and the air transportation system. As an integral part of this airborne surveillance, air traffic control radio communications and procedures are monitored and evaluated. Any discrepancies or problem areas noted are included in the surveillance report, submitted by the inspector upon completion of each flight. From January 1982 through March 1983, 30,190 surveillance reports of air carrier flight operations were completed by 1,212 inspectors throughout the United States, during normal, night, and weekend operations. Although there were numerous comments alluding to the improved rapport between air traffic controllers and operators, no major problem areas were noted in these reports. In addition, flight operations inspectors observed the control of air traffic at various air traffic control facilities throughout the country. During the same period, approximately 421 reports of such visits were submitted, again, with no major discrepancies noted.

While these efforts provide an excellent view of the system, I decided I wanted even more information during this critical rebuilding process. Therefore, as I mentioned a moment ago, to supplement this normal surveillance activity, last December, I

directed 32 senior members of my staff throughout the United States to evaluate and report on the air traffic control system when using agency aircraft for directed travel. They have provided additional airborne evaluations of tower, approach control, and en route center procedures. These evaluations in the last 4 months also show no major problem with the air traffic control system. In addition, I have personally confirmed the operations of the air traffic system through extensive evaluations of the system, monitoring air traffic procedures from the air and visiting facilities on the ground.

In short, Mr. Chairman, I have numerous means within the FAA that tell me how well the system is operating and how safe it is. Uniformly, those measures tell me that our air traffic control system is, indeed, providing the high levels of safety the American traveling public rightfully expects. One need only confirm this observation with the day-to-day users of the air traffic control system. Since the inception of the strike, they have consistently reinforced the FAA's views on the safety of the system.

Before closing, Mr. Chairman, there are a couple of issues I would like to briefly touch on. One has to do with the NTSB report's observation that facilities are being required by Washington to handle more air traffic than they are capable of

handling. That is simply not true. It has never been true. I have been exceedingly cautious--if anything, overcautious--in approving additional operations. In fact, I have mostly turned down proposed increases in capacity developed by field facilities and provided to headquarters through regional offices, not because I don't trust their judgment but because of my concern that we exercise extreme caution in this area. For example, recently I reduced substantially the proposed level of growth proposed by local management at seven locations. In not one single instance have we ever directed an increase. In addition to exercising extreme care in approving any additional capacity in the system, we also oversee the nationwide air traffic flow through our Central Flow Control facility in Washington, D.C. When informed of bottlenecks or reductions in system capacity due to weather or other circumstances, control flow control can and does implement necessary ground delay programs. Our centers are still generally required to provide a minimum of 20 miles in-trail separation between aircraft in our high altitude sectors regardless of altitude. This technique limits the number of aircraft in any given sector to prevent saturation. We have, also, asked the airlines and general aviation, in some cases, to fly certain specific routes to avoid strike-impacted areas and congestion. And we are working to improve our overall traffic management capabilities. Traffic Management Units (TMU's) are being organized in all 20 centers and in selected

Level V terminal facilities. TMU's consist of 8 to 15 highly trained air traffic management specialists whose main functions are to analyze center traffic flow and to ensure that traffic volume does not exceed sector controller capabilities. Our Enroute Sector Loading Program, scheduled for implementation in September 1983, will alert national and local traffic managers when sector volume in any of our high altitude sectors will exceed a predetermined criterion. Approximately one-half of the existing 218 high sectors will be covered initially by this program. Controlled Departure Times will be issued to aircraft destined for areas where capacity is predicted to be exceeded. This will eliminate instances of serious arrival peaking. A limited version of this program will be available on September 1, 1983. Finally we are working on Enroute Arrival Metering. We will phase-in on a center-by-center basis, beginning in June 1983, a new metering program for arrival traffic. Arrival traffic approaching (135 miles out) high activity airports will be metered in an orderly fashion so as to arrive in a disciplined manner. This method coupled with controlled departure times will ensure that enroute arrival sectors and terminal facilities will not become overloaded and heavy traffic "bunching" will not take place. Substantial improvements to all of these programs can be expected in early 1984, when new flow control software and hardware will be implemented. I want to assure you, though, that, while we have been working to improve our traffic management capabilities, we

have been very conscious of system capacity and the need for carefully controlling expansion to ensure our controllers' ability to safely handle added traffic.

I would also like to discuss briefly the subject of controller fatigue and stress. Since the inception of the strike, I have remained continually alert to the possibility of excess fatigue occurring among our controller workforce. To that end, we have regulated closely the hours of work for our controllers and have seen a steady decrease in the average hours worked nationwide. Nationwide, our controllers are now averaging approximately 41 hours of work in a week, with some facilities, of course, having to put in more work than others. Last year our goal was to provide each controller with a full week off. This year our goal is to provide each controller with a two week vacation, and I believe we will either meet or come very close to meeting that objective. I am fully aware of the Subcommittee's interest in monitoring of potential stress among our controllers. We are aware of no practical, objective means to isolate and monitor fatigue or stress alone, but we do have underway an individual performance quality control program for controllers that is intended to lead to the early identification and correction of minor deficiencies in performance. Because that is a long-range program, we have taken a number of steps in the interim. We now have an

introductory program at the FAA Academy on management of stress which provides a brief overview of the causes of stress and introduces ways to cope more effectively with stressful events. We have provided information on the management of stress in air traffic controllers to our regions, and will be supplementing that effort with a videotape on management of stress. I have also issued instructions for our flight surgeons, located at air traffic centers throughout the country, to develop a program of visiting high activity terminals to talk to management officials and controllers, and to monitor work activities at those locations. Beyond these efforts, we're just not sure of additional efforts that would prove worthwhile, so we would welcome any thoughts the Subcommittee may have.

Before closing, Mr. Chairman, I want to discuss the implications in the NTSB's report that little has changed in air traffic facilities since the strike, and that employee-management relations remain virtually the same. While we haven't gotten where we need to go, I don't think it's correct to suggest that a fair degree of progress has not been made. The comprehensive human relations program I have underway in the FAA cannot be accomplished overnight, nor have I ever indicated that it would be. It is a slow process, taking years not months. However, we have already achieved a

number of important steps in that process. I would like to take a moment to describe some of the things we have already accomplished in promoting an improved working environment in the FAA.

We now have a human relations specialist assigned to each region and to headquarters, and an overall human relations program manager has been appointed. This program is supervised directly by the Deputy Administrator. Facility Advisory Boards have been established at larger air traffic facilities so that employees at all levels in terminals and centers may provide input on procedures and working conditions to facility, regional, and headquarters management. In fact, the idea for Facility Advisory Boards was developed by a task group comprised of controllers, supervisors, and managers. Supervisory committees have also been established at the larger air traffic facilities. We have issued a handbook for air traffic employees in centers and towers, that was developed by a team randomly selected from a cross section of the air traffic workforce, and which sets out employees' rights and responsibilities and covers areas of particular interest to these employees. We have strengthened our supervisory and management training at the FAA Management Training School, and completion of supervisory training is now a prerequisite to selection as an FAA supervisor. In regional offices, centers,

and at headquarters, we have human relations committees which provide employees at all levels the opportunity to voice their concerns about all aspects of their working environment. We have, in effect, opened up new channels of communication for FAA employees, and we have been listening to what they have to say. I would also add that this effort starts from the top down. My senior staff has held two strategic planning sessions within the last month to decide what improvements we can make in FAA's work environment now and in the future. We are committed to making the FAA a model employer. I want to emphasize, though, that this effort applies to all segments of the FAA, not just to our controller workforce.

In summary, Mr. Chairman, I want to reemphasize that our air traffic system remains safe and continues to provide air travelers the highest level of safety they will find anywhere in the world. We will continue to work toward making it even better, and look forward to the continued support of this Subcommittee.

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