

STATEMENT OF MICHAEL J. FENELLO, ACTING ADMINISTRATOR, FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION, BEFORE THE HOUSE PUBLIC WORKS AND TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE, SUBCOMMITTEE ON INVESTIGATIONS AND OVERSIGHT, CONCERNING THE AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL SYSTEM AND FAA EFFORTS TO REDUCE OR ELIMINATE STRESS IN THE AIR TRAFFIC CONTROLLER WORKFORCE. MARCH 29, 1984.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I appreciate the opportunity to present to the Subcommittee the efforts FAA has made concerning the rebuilding of the air traffic control system and discuss the subject of stress in the controller workforce. To assist me in responding to your questions I have with me today Mr. Raymond Van Vuren, Associate Administrator for Air Traffic; Dr. H.L. Reighard, the Federal Air Surgeon; and Drs. Carl Melton and William Collins of the Civil Aeromedical Institute (CAMI).

Before discussing the subject of stress I would like to respond to your request that we briefly bring you up to date on the status of our air traffic rebuilding efforts. Let me describe where we stand today versus before. Pre-strike, we had on board 3,064 developmental controllers and 13,133 full performance level (FPL) controllers for a total of 16,197. On August 3, 1981, we had 592 developmentals and 3429 FPLs, for a total of 4021. As of the end of February, we had on board 2,469 nonradar developmentals; 3,542 nonradar controllers; 694 radar developmentals; 5,344 radar controllers and 1,225 Air

Traffic Assistants, for a total of 13,274 controllers and assistants working the air traffic functions. This is an increase of 9,253 during the recovery, and represents almost full achievement of our goal. Obviously, however, training must continue at the facilities to bring the developmental controllers up to full capabilities.

From the users' perspective the system is almost completely recovered. Of the 22 original airports subject to slot allocation, only 4 remain subject to those restrictions. Three of these airports, Denver Stapleton, Chicago O'Hare, and LaGuardia, will have all strike-related restrictions removed on April 1st (although O'Hare and LaGuardia will be subject to a revised form of the high density rule which was in effect prior to the strike). Because of the closing of one runway for reconditioning, and the anticipated demand for air traffic during the Olympics, restrictions will not be removed at Los Angeles International until after the Olympic Games.

Elimination of the general aviation reservation (GAR) system for center slots was completed on December 31, 1983. Finally, except for those facilities I've just mentioned, we are essentially handling or capable of handling pre-strike traffic loads, and, as more controllers become operational, our capabilities are continuing to increase. We remain vigilant, however, to assure that traffic growth does not exceed our

capabilities. That has been an inviolable premise of our rebuilding effort--safety may not be compromised in any manner.

Let me turn now to a discussion of stress in the controller workforce. This is an issue which has historically been of interest to the FAA. As you know, FAA has sponsored a number of studies, such as the Rose Study, that either directly or indirectly relate to the issue of controller stress. These studies and FAA's own internal studies and reviews of the literature conducted by Dr. Melton and others at CAMI have concluded that controlling air traffic is no more stressful than many other occupations. Nonetheless, we appreciate the fact that excessive amounts of stress, whether job-related or externally caused, can be of concern regarding the air traffic control workforce. Therefore, to avoid potential problems before they develop, the FAA has taken a number of steps to reduce the potential for stress and fatigue, monitor controllers for signs of stress or fatigue, and help them deal with stress.

Actions FAA has taken to reduce stress/fatigue include:

- o Workload management, such as flow control to reduce traffic peaks.

o Cutting overtime and increasing vacations. Since the strike recovery began, overtime has gone steadily down, and annual leave allowed controllers has increased. Last year all facilities provided at least 2 weeks annual leave to controllers. This year some facilities will provide at least 3 weeks. There are still some facilities which routinely schedule overtime, and this will be eliminated when staffing allows it. I should point out, however, that every effort is made to excuse a controller who does not wish to work the overtime. This is not possible in every case, but it is our intent, and our supervisors try to work this out if at all possible. It should also be noted that overtime is not per se stressful, and, in fact, as the Subcommittee heard in recent testimony from working controllers, many volunteer to work overtime. Thus, while we are aware of the fact that excessive overtime could present a problem for certain individuals, it would not be accurate to automatically equate overtime with a stressful or fatiguing situation.

o Providing opportunity for controller input into procedures and working conditions. As the Subcommittee is no doubt aware, one of the factors which can work to alleviate possible tension in the workplace is giving employees a voice in how the job is performed, what

procedures are developed and followed, personnel practices, and other conditions of the work environment. You have heard testimony from members of the Facility Advisory Boards (FABs) from various facilities. You know that the purpose of these groups is to ensure that input from the workforce is considered in these matters. We believe that these groups are functioning successfully--with employee participation varying from facility to facility--to promote the utilization of employees as an "idea reservoir" to make recommendations to facility management. Overall, as the testimony of the FAB Chairmen before this Subcommittee indicated, management has been responsive to their recommendations and I hope you have perceived the same commitment.

In addition, we have utilized the concept of "diagonal slice" working groups, where every level of the controller workforce is represented, to examine various problems, new concepts and procedures. Last year in headquarters our Air Traffic Service convened 78 such working groups involving 880 participants. Similar groups have been convened at the regional level. Controller participation was very helpful in arriving at innovative solutions to problems and in determining whether new concepts and procedures could be implemented in the field or whether modifications would be

required before this could be accomplished. We value the controllers' input and intend to make full use of this resource as we continue to try to improve the air traffic system.

o Promoting better management/workforce communications.

In addition to the FABs, which provide a forum for controllers, the FAA has established Human Relations Committees (HRCs) at facilities to serve as a forum for suggestions and concerns from all employees. As Prof. Karasek pointed out in an interview in U.S. News & World Report last year, it is important for all employees to have a good network of communications among themselves to help them develop ideas for change, and for employers to allow channels of communication to be structured so that concerns and recommendations can be effectively expressed. We believe that the Human Relations Committees help to accomplish this.

Agency-wide, at last count, there were 920 employee involvement groups comprised of more than 6000 people. In addition, the human relations staff has held 1280 workshops/training sessions attended by nearly 11,000 employees. I believe you can see that this is a major program the agency is undertaking. We are committed to it and have devoted considerable resources to it, because we think it is important to the future of the agency.

o Educating management on interpersonal skills. The FAA is working to change its orientation from a strictly technical agency, to one which is more people-oriented--one which realizes that its most valuable resource is the people who work for it. As part of this new philosophy we have revised and continue to revise our standards for promotion to management positions to include more human relations skills. Moreover, we are training our managers in these skills. For example, all newly selected supervisors must take and pass an in-house resident supervisor's course prior to assuming supervisory duties. Of the 99 training hours in the current version of this course, 16 hours are directly concerned with improving interpersonal skills and dealing with employee needs. Included are topics such as stress, employee counselling, and substance abuse. An additional 58 hours are devoted to other human relations subjects.

All newly selected managers likewise must complete an in-house resident manager's course within one year of assuming managerial duties. In this 75-hour course, heavy emphasis is placed on topics directly related to employee welfare, such as group dynamics and employee motivation; the FAA Human Relations Policy; managing change; and stress.

We are also sending current managers through courses designed to improve their human relations skills. Many top

managers have attended a 3-week management course at the University of Michigan. Middle level managers are required to take courses at FAA's Management Training School or locally through such sources as OPM, the American Management Association, local colleges, etc. To date over 4700 supervisors and managers have taken the courses offered by FAA, and almost 1200 more are scheduled to take them by the end of the fiscal year.

Thus, there should be no question that the FAA is serious about changing management attitudes and interpersonal skills. When we began this program, however, we stated, as did the Jones Committee, that it would take years for this goal to be fully realized. I understand that Dr. Jones, in testimony last week, agreed that we have made a good start. We intend to press forward with this effort. No doubt there are still times when we encounter examples of poor management practices, but that doesn't mean that our efforts are not in good faith, or that they have failed. It would be extremely naive to expect an organization comprising over 45,000 employees to be able to undergo a massive reorientation in a year or two. We have made substantial progress, however, as Dr. Jones indicated. We will maintain the intensity of those efforts, and we expect them to result in lasting change which will make the FAA a much stronger organization.

Having taken steps to try to reduce or eliminate stress in the workplace, the next step is to ensure there are adequate monitoring systems to detect excessive stress and fatigue which may nonetheless occur. FAA has taken the following actions to monitor for stress:

- o Throughout the recovery period we held frequent telecons with air traffic control managers and supervisors reminding them to observe for "stress and fatigue". We told them to give weight to controller self-assessments of fatigue and take any such controller off his or her work station immediately.

- o Air Traffic Service evaluation teams conduct continuing surveillance of system performance in the field, and this includes human performance. Any signs of unusual behavior in controlling traffic are investigated. Moreover, these teams talk with controllers to get their thoughts and feelings about their facilities, working conditions, and incidents and issues that concern them. Based on the testimony of our controllers before this Subcommittee, I don't think you would be surprised, Mr. Chairman, by the candor the controllers display in talking to evaluation team members, who are all former controllers themselves. Consequently, we believe this is an excellent tool in helping us to assess the status of the system.

o Following up on the hearings held before this Subcommittee last year, Dr. Reighard canvassed 26 organizations such as the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, medical schools, public health facilities, and corporations along with qualified individuals, to develop a checklist of warning signs to look for in order to detect stress and fatigue. Through this effort, he found one checklist which has been used by a major corporation for several years, and has been found by them to be a helpful guide for their supervisors to use in discovering and assisting employees who may be under strain, for whatever reason. Employees who are found to be suffering from stress or fatigue are referred to the company's employee assistance program for help. The corporation is quite pleased with the way this system has helped maintain the health and productivity of their workers. Dr. Reighard has sent a copy of this checklist to all air traffic supervisors, through the regional flight surgeons, for use in all air traffic facilities.

Naturally, the question arises as to how we try to help employees who may be suffering from stress or fatigue, whether we identify them through medical examinations, through our supervisors and quality assurance teams, or they identify

themselves. Before covering that issue, I would like first to mention some of the general steps we have taken to advise the entire workforce of means to manage stress.

o At the FAA Academy, trainees are given a one hour training/orientation course by CAMI behavioral scientists regarding the phenomenon of stress and how to ameliorate it. A videotape of this course has been prepared and distributed to ATC facilities for viewing by all air traffic personnel. Over 11,000 controllers have already seen it. We conducted a sampling survey of those who viewed the tape, in order to assess its usefulness. About 95% of those surveyed felt that they understood what stress is and could recognize signs of stress within themselves. Seventy-seven percent thought they could recognize signs of stress in others. Eighty-eight percent felt they understood how to deal with stress, such as through diet and exercise. About two thirds found the tape informative and useful, and about half would like more information on the subject. We intend to follow-up on this and provide more information to the controllers on topics such as how to recognize stress in others.

o Last July Dr. Reighard and Mr. Van Vuren jointly sent a memo to all controllers concerning stress management. The

emphasis of the memo was on the shared responsibility of supervisors and controllers in managing stress. The main points of the memo covered the work environment; maintaining high skills; developing good work habits; and maintaining physical fitness.

o We are working on improving our program to assist employees who are identified as having possible problems with stress or fatigue. As you know, 13 of our en route centers are staffed with a flight surgeon, and our regional flight surgeons closely monitor air traffic controller health at the centers where contract physicians provide services. Each region has established an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) which is designed to deal with a host of employee problems such as substance abuse, stress, alcoholism, and mental or emotional problems. This is not limited to air traffic controllers, but would certainly be helpful in assisting controllers who are identified as being under stress. Some of the regions operate an in-house program, while others have supplemented these efforts by contracting with outside counselling agencies. We are in the process of gathering information on the effectiveness of the different programs in the regions, with an eye towards improving the programs by implementing particularly useful services throughout the regions. In this regard, I would note again that the corporation which developed the "stress checklist" we have adopted found that

the employee assistance program was very effective in dealing with problems they had identified. We are confident that ours will prove equally effective, and we will make any necessary improvements to ensure that it is.

We believe the steps taken by the FAA to reduce stress, monitor stress, and assist employees deal with stress constitute an imaginative and effective program to address this concern. They are consistent with the findings and recommendations of studies on behalf of the FAA, such as the Rose study and the Jones study. They also follow the published recommendations of professionals such as Professor Karasek who has mentioned signs of stress to look for, and how to alleviate stress by improving communications, giving workers input into decisionmaking, and the like.

We intend to monitor our efforts to make sure that they are productive. In fact, we are commencing a national survey of the attitudes of our workforce by Dr. Schroeder of CAMI. This is the same survey he recently completed in the Western-Pacific region, which indicated that, in general, controllers have a positive attitude towards the workplace, their supervisors, and their work. We also intend to work on those areas where controllers have expressed some concern. You will recall that Dr. Jones suggested just such an approach to ensure that top management is aware of the feelings of workers in the field

facilities. In this way, I feel we will be able to avoid the filtering effect you are concerned about, Mr. Chairman.

Another means Dr. Jones suggested is for top management to visit field facilities regularly, to talk directly with working controllers and other employees. As I am sure you are aware, Mr. Helms made extensive visits to the field from the outset of his tenure, well before the strike began, and he continued that practice throughout his post-strike term in office. I have also travelled extensively to our field facilities, and I am confident that I have a good idea of controllers' attitudes and feelings. It is my understanding that the three days of testimony you received from our field personnel was, in general, very positive. Neither this testimony nor the Western-Pacific attitude survey has contradicted the reports I have received through the chain of command or my own impressions from my field visits.

Mr. Chairman, I believe we have made significant progress in improving the working conditions of our employees. We will keep on top of the situation to assure that we continue to make progress. I do not pretend that we have achieved all our goals. This takes time and effort, and FAA has made a commitment to that effort. We welcome input from this Subcommittee and anyone else who might make suggestions that can help us improve our organization.

However, I don't want the Subcommittee to be left with the impression that the controller workforce has a negative attitude, or that our working relationships are rapidly deteriorating. They're not. Across the country, we have thousands of men and women who like their jobs, who find their work challenging and stimulating. Our attitude surveys have confirmed this fact. Clearly, in any organization with a workforce of 14,000 there are some employees who are dissatisfied for one reason or another, and some who will never be happy. We recognize that. There are a variety of issues at any given time which may be of concern to our employees. We recognize that employees often have legitimate complaints or suggestions, and we have established structures, or lines of communication, to allow them to air these views and have them considered and addressed by management.

In fact, it is my understanding that several issues were raised by our controllers who testified before you last week as being of concern to a number of our controllers: resectorization; structured staffing; and the operational error detection program. Let me touch briefly on these issues before closing. Incidentally, I would note that all of these issues have arisen before this Subcommittee previously.

We are nearly finished with our resectorization program which

was developed to optimize overall system design and efficiency. Through this effort we have reduced our number of sectors from 721 to 575 full-time and 10 part-time sectors. This program enables us to control traffic more efficiently and with greater productivity by structuring sectors to simplify coordination requirements, maximize automation capabilities, and the like. To assist us with this program, we used working groups from the field, regions, and Washington headquarters.

Clearly, there are a number of controllers who did not favor the resectorization program, because of the need for training on new sectors. I understand that reaction. We believed it important to proceed with the program, however, because it made sense to train our new controllers, to the extent possible, on the new sectors rather than training them on old and new sectors. Moreover, resectorization helps us better balance our staffing with workload, which was an important consideration during this rebuilding period. In pursuing our resectorization program, I believe it is important to observe that we have not proven to be inflexible in our approach. In fact, testimony before this Subcommittee indicated that modifications were authorized at the request of facility personnel in the Los Angeles Center.

Insofar as our operational error detection program is concerned, I am advised that the Subcommittee expressed concern that there seemed to be some differences of understanding about the program among the controllers. This program, as the Subcommittee is aware, is intended as a quality assurance effort on the part of the FAA, to enable us to detect operational errors which might occur and to address the reasons for their occurrence. There is no question this kind of program has been needed, and I trust that the Subcommittee would endorse these efforts given its past concerns about the potential for failing to report operational errors. In implementing this program, we have sought to communicate fully with our controller workforce. Our quality assurance manager in Washington visits each en route center about 30 days before the operational error detection program is implemented in order to brief facility personnel on the program and to answer questions they may have. Normally this presentation is videotaped so that it can be replayed during other crew briefings.

The week before implementation of the program, the quality assurance manager visits the facility again and spends 2 1/2 days responding to questions about the program and working with the area manager and quality assurance officer to ensure the facility is ready to implement the program. Two days after the

system has been implemented, the quality assurance manager visits the facility once again for another 2 1/2 day period to respond to any follow-up questions or concerns the controllers may have. Consequently, there are three separate visits paid to each facility to seek to assure that adequate communication is taking place.

Let me touch briefly on our structured staffing program. This program, implemented last October, established radar controller, non-radar controller, and air traffic assistant positions at centers and at the higher activity combined cab/TRACON terminal facilities. Under this program, new controllers in radar facilities will not automatically advance to radar controller positions. Instead, controllers will compete for selection to radar controller positions. In this way, two very important things occur. One, savings will accrue to the Federal Government through a wiser use of our human resources; that is, the less demanding controller work will be done by individuals who are compensated accordingly, and vice versa. Two, we expect this program will improve the overall quality of the controller workforce since a limited number of radar controller positions will be filled by the top available talent, rather than seeking to promote all individuals into radar positions. The structured staffing approach recognizes

that, previously, controllers performed functions below the full performance level approximately 50% of the time; in other words, we were paying someone a high salary rate to perform functions that someone less qualified could readily do. It is simply not necessary for all controllers to be at the full performance level--rather, the positions should be matched to the functions being performed. That is the intent of our structured staffing program.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I want to say that we as an agency are proud of our controllers, and I as an individual am also proud of them. They have done a magnificent job in coping with difficult circumstances brought about by the illegal strike. They have kept air commerce moving, and the nation owes them a debt of gratitude. We worked hard to obtain Congressional approval for an increased pay package we thought they deserved. That has been accomplished. We are working hard to improve the conditions they work under. That is being accomplished.

We want the working controllers to feel they are a part of the system. We value the contribution they can make as we design new equipment and facilities under the National Airspace System (NAS) Plan, and new procedures under the National Airspace Review (NAR). Our theme is "One FAA", meaning that we are all a part of making air travel safe, and we need the effort of

every individual employee to accomplish this. I am confident that the vast majority of FAA's employees from top management on down and from the bottom on up will respond to this challenge, and we will continue to improve on a national airspace system that is the best in the world.

That concludes my prepared statement, Mr. Chairman. At this time my colleagues and I would be pleased to respond to your questions.