

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE DONALD D. ENGEN, FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATOR, BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION, SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION, CONCERNING S. 2417. JULY 17, 1986.

Madam Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I welcome the opportunity to appear before the Subcommittee today to discuss the topics of air traffic controller and aviation safety inspector staffing, and to provide the FAA's views concerning S. 2417, which would establish an independent aviation safety commission to review the performance of the FAA, its organizational structure, and the impacts on aviation safety of the economic deregulation of the aviation industry.

The past 10 years have proven to be very challenging for the FAA. The FAA has weathered a difficult strike; has introduced the National Airspace System Plan, the largest upgrade of its facilities ever; has adjusted to great airline growth after deregulation; and has accommodated first to a peaking of general aviation growth, and then a leveling off. The agency has been virtually under a microscope for the past five years with wide ranging review of nearly every facet of its operations, with particular focus on the air traffic control system and our surveillance functions.

Being a student of history, I find myself faced with similar problems of Administrators past. I am singularly impressed with

how the interests of Congress have not changed nor has the criticality of what the FAA does been altered. Challenges remain to be addressed, and improvements are still needed, but many important lessons have been learned. In my view, the FAA is now a stronger organization, having gone through the difficult period of the first half of this decade.

As the Subcommittee is well aware, in 1981, the controllers' union struck in an attempt to seek inordinate wage compensation by bringing the Nation's air transportation system to a halt. Fortunately, that effort was unsuccessful. But keeping the system operating with reasonable efficiency while preserving its high safety levels, and concurrently taking the necessary steps to rebuild the system, was not without its costs. It proved to be a very demanding time for agency employees who work in air traffic control and other disciplines as well. It has occupied much time of the agency's senior staff, responding to Congressional concern and oversight while attempting to solve daily and long-range operational problems, as well as attitudinal and management challenges. Even so, it has proven to be a great opportunity for us to better understand the workings of the air traffic control system and to reexamine the traditional ways of doing business within that system. There has been great change. Virtually every aspect of that system has been looked at--ranging from safety performance to the human resource elements.

I am comfortable today that we understand the challenges facing the air traffic control system. In fact, with changes I have instituted, operational control over the system is now exercised at the headquarters level rather than in the regions, meaning that our day to day involvement with the system is much strengthened over the past. I noted that we have benefited from an increased understanding of the air traffic control system during the rebuilding period, and have viewed it as an opportunity to make improvements. The assignment of operational control to headquarters is but one example. We have also made realignments in airspace to simplify air traffic control requirements, and we have refined our flow control procedures which keep airplanes on the ground rather than holding enroute when weather conditions are bad. We have improved our screening process for new controllers and have made improvements in the actual training. We have added new equipment and software to our facilities, such as the automatic error detection program which alerts us automatically whenever a controller experiences an operational error. We have restaffed our facilities with highly qualified and motivated air traffic controllers, and have achieved 98% of our targetted staffing level for this fiscal year. As of the end of June, our controller workforce totalled 14,262 compared to our end of year goal of 14,480 employees. We will reach that goal by the end of September. And, importantly, we have made progress--although more remains to be done--in promoting better human relations in our air traffic facilities.

In short, although the demands placed on the agency to respond to the air traffic controllers' strike in 1981 have been high, they have been met. Moreover, we have benefited from being placed in a position where we have had to examine all facets of the operation of the air traffic control system in a way that was never done before. This has enhanced our knowledge and understanding of the system and has afforded us the unique opportunity to make a variety of important changes and refinements to that system.

I mentioned a moment ago that significant focus has been placed on our inspection and surveillance responsibilities. This is one of the most important of the functions performed by the FAA. Our safety regulations are only as good as their compliance rate. As a Member of the NTSB, I grew concerned about the adequacy of the FAA's surveillance and enforcement resources, and the ability of the FAA to meet a growing and changing industry. Secretary Dole had that same concern and before I joined the agency she had directed that the FAA fill again those inspector positions that had been reduced.

Since my appointment as Administrator, inspection and surveillance have been a major area to which my senior staff and I have devoted significant time. A variety of reviews we conducted of both the air transportation industry and ourselves confirmed to us that we

were not adequately staffed to conduct appropriate levels of surveillance of the industry. There were other problems as well. We had not prioritized our work functions at the national level in a meaningful way so that the most important work was done first by our inspector personnel. Too often, certification of a new air carrier was accomplished at the expense of surveillance over existing carriers. We had not established minimum levels of surveillance to assure that all operators were inspected each year. We were not examining carriers' operations in a detailed way on a recurring basis, but only when there were indications of a need to do so. We had not given sufficient policy guidance to our workforce, nor had we standardized our practices enough, to ensure that the inspection work done in one office was comparable to that in another. We had decentralized to the degree that headquarters was sometimes too far removed from what was actually occurring in the field.

These deficiencies were brought home to us in a series of assessments we made in 1984 and 1985 of industry and ourselves. A critical analysis of what needed to be improved within the agency's safety surveillance program revealed to us that we needed a substantial revamping of that program. We have been underway for some time in a sweeping program to restructure our entire surveillance program. Manuals are being rewritten to provide our inspectors with up-to-date standardized guidance, in a more detailed way than ever before. Training courses are being

improved, and a variety of new seminars presented. National guidelines have been established, calling for specified minimum levels of surveillance by type of inspection and by operator, and we have instituted cyclical, in-depth reviews of all facets of the aviation industry. Other steps have been taken as well to revitalize the agency's entire surveillance program, to include substantial increases in staffing. Based on my study and recommendations, the Secretary approved last September a three year increase of 500 positions in our inspector workforce. This year, we are adding 150 of those positions. For next year, we have requested an additional 138 positions, and we anticipate requesting the balance of 212 in FY 1988. We have developed a more standardized enforcement procedure. Of more importance, I see the airline industry seeking compliance actively.

Other FAA programs have similarly undergone careful scrutiny both within the agency and by the Congress and other external sources. The FAA security program, for example, has been examined from top to bottom over the past year to respond to an increased security threat in the world. Aggressive changes have been instituted in our security requirements as well as in the staffing of our inspector and air marshal functions. Attention has also been focused on our air traffic control modernization efforts, which is an area where we have continued our positive momentum. By the end of this fiscal year, more than 80% of the major NAS Plan projects will be under contract.

Given these factors, I do not support the enactment of S. 2417, largely because I believe such a study would be unnecessary. I do not resist the idea of an independent commission to examine the FAA because of concern for what it may find. To the contrary, we have benefited tremendously from what we have learned of the agency as we have moved through some difficult times. But that is precisely the point. As a direct result of having to meet a variety of difficult challenges, and as a result of the oversight we have received from bodies such as this Subcommittee to determine how we were meeting those challenges, we have learned a tremendous amount about where we needed improvement. We have established plans to overcome the deficiencies we have noted, and we are well on the way toward achieving the improvements we are seeking. In my view, it is time for us to get on with the needed improvements that we have already discerned, rather than taking additional time to cover ground we have already explored. I frankly believe that there is little that would be gained from another look at the FAA, and that the time and energy which would be expended by senior agency officials in working with and responding to an independent commission would better be justified in getting the job done that we have set out for them.

Before closing, I would add that, although there are a number of areas where I felt there was a need for improvement or fine-tuning in the FAA, the agency has nevertheless performed consistently well. In other words, it is not as if I have had to restructure an agency which has not performed well. To the contrary, my

efforts have been directed at working within one of the finest organizations in the public or private sector to make it even better. I believe the changes we have made and are making and the record of the agency's performance bear this out, and I would like to take a moment to elaborate on that point.

Today, we are handling greater levels of air traffic than ever before--and we are doing it safely and efficiently. The serious delay problem we experienced two summers ago was addressed. There will be delays again, but these will be directly related to available airports and weather. The safety level of the air traffic control system has been consistently high. Operational errors by our controllers have continued to decline. The safety record of the airlines and commuters has continued to improve. In fact, despite the concerns of some before enactment of the Airline Deregulation Act of 1978 that safety, particularly for the commuters, would suffer, the overall safety record has improved since deregulation. The commuter safety record, in particular, has improved tremendously. The reliability of our air traffic control equipment also continues to get better.

Overall, the FAA's and the industry's record has been nothing less than outstanding, even as we have had to face the strike and its aftermath as well as respond to changes in the aviation industry brought about by deregulation. We have not been perfect, and, in fact, as I have acknowledged, there were a number of areas where

we simply needed to do a better job. We defined what those areas were, plotted out a course of self-correction, and we have been taking those necessary corrective actions. We have not completed the job. More remains to be done, but there always will be additional ways of improving as changes occur in the aviation industry.

What the FAA needs now is to continue with the improvements we have in progress in air traffic control, in our surveillance activities, and in other key agency programs. Rather than a protracted examination of the agency or the industry, the travelling public would benefit most, in my view, by completion of the agenda we have set out for the FAA and by continuing to assure that the FAA is provided adequate resources to meet its important safety obligations.

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