STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE T. ALLAN MCARTOR, FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION, BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS AND TRANSPORTATION, SUBCOMMITTEE ON INVESTIGATIONS AND OPERATIONS CONCERNING AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL STAFFING STANDARDS. NOVEMBER 18, 1987.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I welcome the opportunity to discuss the status of our air traffic control system and the staffing standards related to our controller workforce. Before I begin, however, I believe all of us--Congress and FAA--must take a more comprehensive and critical look at the people, equipment, and procedures which constitute our air traffic control system.

It is that larger view, the managerial contest in which we develop staffing standards, which I would like to briefly speak to this morning. Brooks Goldman, FAA's Associate Administrator for Administration, will follow my testimony with specific information regarding air traffic staffing standards.

I've been on the job nearly four months now. Immediately after taking the oath of office I confirmed that FAA is an intensely operational agency that does a remarkable job under enormous pressures. My objective during the initial months was to reassess how well FAA was meeting its challenge. Were we, for example, "modern" in our thinking about air traffic control? Did we have enough controllers to get out ahead of the rapid growth in air commerce? Were we using the latest training technologies and methods to bring our controller workforce up to full performance levels? How can we better recruit and retain controllers? And did our staffing standards reflect today's work environment and anticipate tomorrow's traffic needs?

Mr. Chairman, these are the kinds of questions all of us must ask. Make no mistake, FAA wants to be held accountable to Congress, to industry, and to the American people. That's part of my program to recapture public confidence in aviation. But I also want us to jointly agree on the types of measures FAA should be accountable for. While it is true that we can't manage what we can't measure, we certainly shouldn't base our management on measures which may have little bearing on safely operating the Nation's airspace.

America's air traffic control system is the best in the world. And the system is safe. This past summer, despite doomsday calls and much publicized fear that our skies were unsafe, FAA's air traffic personnel safely handled a record volume of traffic with reduced delays nationwide from the prior summer. Delays were down 24% in September from last year and 45% in October.

But statistics don't tell the entire story. I believe we need new measures to gauge how well we manage air traffic and how safe the system truly is. Near mid-air collision reports, operational errors, pilot deviations, full performance levels and controller workforce numbers--all useful indices--are not, in and of themselves, adequate measures of safety or management effectiveness. For safety, in my view, is better evaluated as overall exposure to risk rather than absence of accidents. And it is exposure to risk that guides my management decisions every day.

My program of accelerated change for fiscal year 1988 is designed to build stronger margins of safety in our air traffic control system. While the system is safe, I am concerned about the margins of safety, and we can only preserve them by simultaneously improving the equipment, people, and procedures in our Nation's airspace.

Mr. Chairman, FPL's, while important indicators of controller proficiency, may not predict how well the workforce manages traffic this afternoon at O'Hare airport or Boston Center. Our staffing standards may anticipate traffic workloads but fail to build in sufficient time for the full demands we place on our controllers. We agree with GAO that our standards should account for special projects such as operational error reviews, employee participation groups or training. Today's controller job is fundamentally different from before the 1981 strike. We must stop comparing ourselves to that vastly different operational and technological time. Likewise, we should end the heroic attitude the post-1981 strike generated: stop thinking we can do more with less, admit that airspace management means more than separating aircraft, and plan for more non-traffic-related controller work.

I have the commitment of Deputy Secretary Jim Burnley to seek these additional resources to help bolster our controller workforce to meet today's air traffic management challenges. Mr. Chairman, you have my pledge not to hide behind the numbers--but rather bring forward the issues and problems of operating the Nation's air traffic control system in a period of unprecedented growth and demand.

But, as I stated earlier, debates on numbers of controllers and FPL's have occupied too much attention and masked the magnitude of the real problems we face.

I need the flexibility to deploy controller resources at critical facilities when problems arise and dynamically respond to changes in air traffic flow nationwide. We must streamline the recruitment, hiring, and training of controllers. It takes much too long to identify good controller candidates and then hire and train them. Advanced simulation techniques are available which can greatly reduce the time needed to bring controllers to full performance levels, lessening the drain of on-the-job training in our facilities. As part of my Impact '88 program, I am conducting a state-of-the-field review of FAA's approach to controller training and plan major revisions in the process this fiscal year.

I'm also concerned about FAA's ability to retain good controllers. Human factors are as critical in the tower cab as they are in the cockpit. Accordingly, I've initiated an Administrator's focus group program to meet directly with employees. We just finished our first one with controllers and, based on their suggestions, have already altered some of our air traffic control procedures to better manage the airspace.

In looking at our staffing standards, we must account for these additional factors affecting our traffic management. There is a vital element of skill progression within our air traffic control system, and lower level facilities provide experience and career growth to many controllers. Staffing standards must factor in this kind of special involvement, and we are doing so.

We are also developing staffing standards for supervisory and traffic management coordinators. We are in the process of redefining the controller workforce as recommended by the recent GAO report which was initiated at your request. The new definition will more clearly define the personnel who have direct responsibilities for air traffic control. Supervisors and traffic management coordinators will be included in the new definition, and development of staffing standards for these groups will result in comprehensive coverage of the workforce.

And finally, Mr. Chairman, we cannot ignore equipment needs in our ATC system. With growth in controller numbers, comes a pressing need for more controller scopes and consoles. Through our Impact '88 program, we are committed to accelerating our procurement of new technologies and refurbishing older ones.

When I say new technologies, I'm referring to wholly new ways of controlling air traffic. Technology exists today to provide--through satellite and ground based data-links--simultaneous information to pilots for air traffic control. These new technologies will revolutionize FAA's approach to air traffic control and the related staffing standards to manage the system. Through our Impact '88 program, FAA has renewed and broadened its commitment to new ATC technologies.

Mr. Chairman, we are taking a serious look at how we manage our air traffic control resources. Today's intense scrutiny on civil aviation offers unique opportunities to work together to build a stronger air traffic control system so that we can safely handle sustained growth in the future. In building better staffing standards, we also have an opportunity to finally close the book on the 1981 controller strike and look forward, with great promise, to the modern ATC system of the 1990's.

I welcome any questions you may have. Thank you.

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