

FINAL

STATEMENT OF MONTE BELGER, ASSOCIATE ADMINISTRATOR FOR AIR TRAFFIC SERVICES, FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION, BEFORE THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE, SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION, CONCERNING THE AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL SYSTEM. SEPTEMBER 26, 1995.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I welcome the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss actions the FAA is taking to improve the nation's air traffic control system. With me today are Gary Duffy, Manager of the Chicago Systems Management Office, and Denis Burke, Air Traffic Manager for the Chicago Center. I assure you that we all share your serious concerns about the recent outages here at the Chicago Center and at other Air Route Traffic Control Centers. We initiated an Action Plan in August to address these problems, and are taking a number of steps to minimize any outages in the future. We are firmly committed to ensuring that the FAA continues to provide the safest and most efficient air traffic control system anywhere.

We have equipped all of our Centers with many levels of backup equipment, and trained our controllers in operating procedures, to ensure that all Centers safely handle any interruptions that may occur. We are improving the equipment, training, and contingency planning throughout our system to make sure that we maintain the highest level of safety under all operating conditions. If necessary, we will delay aircraft to maintain the same level of safety.

While I do not wish to minimize the seriousness of any equipment outage, I would like to provide some context. We have over thirty thousand pieces of equipment in the national airspace system. Despite the age of much of this equipment, we have steadily been increasing its operational availability rate. This figure represents the percent of time the equipment is available for use. For 1995, the operational availability rate was 99.4 percent, up from 98.6 percent a decade ago. When equipment is unavailable, we may need to slow air traffic down, resulting in some delays. But it is important to keep those delays in perspective: less than two percent of annual delays are equipment-related. While we are doing everything we can to improve performance, I think the FAA can justifiably take pride in this record.

Let me provide some background for our Action Plan. At Air Route Traffic Control Centers such as Chicago, controllers direct aircraft in air routes outside the terminal airspace surrounding airports. The Centers' job is to ensure a safe, orderly, and expeditious flow of traffic throughout the airspace they control. They separate aircraft operating under instrument flight rules, monitor and manage traffic, and issue traffic and weather advisories.

There are twenty Centers in the contiguous United States. They each use a type of display channel system for air traffic control. These systems receive data from the main air traffic control system at the Center, called the Host computer, then reformat the data and transmit it to the controller displays. Five of the Centers -- Chicago, New York,

Washington, Fort Worth and Cleveland -- have a Display Channel Complex system using an IBM 9020E computer. These systems, which use the oldest remaining part of the original en-route system installed in the 1960s, are the ones that have been increasingly experiencing outages, and we are concentrating near-term initiatives at these Centers to prevent interruptions and minimize inconvenience when we do have interruptions.

The remaining fifteen centers have Computer Display Channel systems using a Raytheon computer. While they are not as prone to problems as the five centers with the Display Channel Complex using the IBM 9020E computer, we are monitoring these systems carefully as well.

Many of you are familiar with the large-scale modernization project that was known as the Advanced Automation System, or AAS. After a thorough review of AAS, Administrator Hinson and Deputy Administrator Daschle decided last year that we needed to make major changes in this program to achieve our goals. In the course of restructuring that program, we decided that the most critical need at our Centers was to replace the aging display channel systems. That is why we developed the Display System Replacement program, or DSR, which will replace the existing infrastructure, including en-route controller workstations and software, with a more robust and flexible system. Under this long-term infrastructure improvement program, we expect the first site to be operational by October of 1998.

At the time we restructured AAS, we also saw that we needed an insurance program, in case there were delays in implementing the Display System Replacement program, or in case the older equipment began to malfunction more frequently. We added the Display Channel Complex Rehost project, or DCCR, to meet that need. DCCR can execute the old computer software on a new commercial off-the-shelf computer, and works as a short-term fix until the new Display System Replacement is installed.

Last month, as a major part of our Action Plan, we decided to install the Display Channel Complex Rehost at the five Centers with the oldest equipment. DCCR will replace the Display Channel Complex systems that use the IBM 9020E. DCCR, unlike the old system, is highly reliable. The DCCR will be easier to maintain, and we will not have to worry about finding spare parts or technicians who know how to service the system. Controllers also will find it easier to use, and the training period to achieve technical proficiency is shorter than for the old system. The Air Transport Association and the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, as well as the General Accounting Office and the National Transportation Safety Board, support FAA's decision to proceed with DCCR.

The first DCCR will be delivered to Chicago in April of 1997, and is scheduled to be ready to operate by October of 1997. The DCCR equipment will be installed at the remaining four Centers between May and August of 1997, and is scheduled to be operational between November of 1997 and February of 1998. Under the FAA's Action

Plan, we will replace the current computers sixteen months earlier than the Display System Replacement program.

The reason we are projecting delivery in 1997 is not because of delays in buying the computer hardware. It is because we have to write new software that is compatible with the 1960's vintage software now running the 9020E computers. We are acutely aware that any system has limitations, especially when it is operated under intense pressure, around-the-clock, every day of the year. That is why we build in multiple redundancies, back-up systems that are designed to activate at the first sign of a problem. Air traffic control procedures, such as increased spacing of aircraft and ground holds, are also designed to ensure safety in the event of an outage.

We depend on our airway facilities technicians, who do an excellent job maintaining this complicated equipment, and on our air traffic controllers, who carry out their challenging responsibilities with tremendous skill and dedication. We are aware that Congress is considering changes in the federal retirement system that could encourage our most senior maintenance technicians to retire sooner than they would under the current system. It will be difficult to manage the system if we lose valuable staff members who are so experienced with our oldest and most fragile equipment.

Right now, despite the budgetary and personnel constraints on the FAA, we are improving our training and staffing to make the best of the systems we currently have.

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We intend to hire at least 116 new airway facilities technicians nationwide by the end of this month, and next month we will begin new training courses for technicians on maintenance procedures for aging equipment. We are hiring additional controllers for Chicago, and are in the process of conducting refresher training for controllers on making the transition to and from backup radar systems. All of our emergency operating procedures and contingency plans are being revised and updated as necessary. As part of our Action Plan, we also directed all technicians and engineers to immediately review their local facility and its backup capabilities.

The long-term solution to FAA's modernization needs is real reform in the areas of financing, procurement, and personnel. We must have a predictable and sufficient source of funds to meet the growing needs of not only the aviation industry but also the American traveling public. We must have the ability to bring on new technology at a faster pace, and the flexibility to hire and move personnel quickly to the facilities where they are most needed to serve industry's needs. The FAA is pleased that various bills have been introduced in Congress that address these issues, and we are eager to work with Congress to resolve this.

That concludes my prepared statement, and I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have at this time.