



U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

Senator John D. (Jay) Rockefeller IV, Chairman

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FAA CONFERENCE MEETING

Prepared Opening Remarks – Chairman John D. (Jay) Rockefeller IV

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Almost a year ago, the Senate passed its FAA reauthorization bill on a bipartisan vote of 87-8. It has been a long and arduous process to get to today. I think we all can acknowledge that the process has embodied the best and worst of Congress. Today, we all must focus not on the process, but the result. The result is one of which we can all be enormously proud.

The outcome is that we have a bill that will take steps to modernize our air traffic control system, make the air transportation system safer than ever, and make certain small communities have access to critical air service. It will make sure the FAA continues to set the gold standard for safety oversight and the U.S. aviation industry remains competitive and strong. This conference report delivers results that America needs and deserves.

We all share the common goal of making sure that the United States continues to have the safest, most efficient, and modern aviation system in the world. I think we all recognize that a healthy and growing aviation industry is fundamentally important for the economic future of our country.

All of us at this table made compromises. We all sacrificed some strongly held policy positions on labor issues. The decisions our respective leaders made were not easy. The compromises we have made will allow us to achieve our shared goals. After several long years, these compromises will allow us to pass a comprehensive 4-year FAA reauthorization bill. The compromises we have made will move our aviation system forward.

I strongly believe that today is a day to look toward the future. Today is a day to focus on what this bill does and how it will make needed critical investments in our aviation system. In this era of scarce resources, we have still managed to produce a bill that provides the FAA the resources it needs to meet its mission. I am deeply proud of that fact.

I know that we have a number of Members who want to speak so I will be brief. I want to highlight a few of the provisions of which I am especially proud. For much of the past decade, I have fought to make sure that the FAA has the resources and ability to implement the Next Generation Air Transportation System (NextGen).

This bill will require the FAA to move forward on key aspects of the air traffic control modernization effort. It accelerates satellite-based navigation and surveillance that will make the system safer and more efficient by providing pilots and controllers more precise tracking and weather information. The bill makes certain the FAA implements NextGen effectively and on schedule with clear timelines and requirements. It establishes a Chief NextGen Officer to lead the effort, performance metrics to make certain benefits are realized, and takes steps to improve coordination among relevant federal agencies.

While modernization will provide the greatest safety benefits, the bill also requires the FAA to move forward on other critical safety measures. The bill mandates key improvements to the oversight and regulation of airlines, foreign repair stations, air ambulance operations; and will make sure the FAA improves airport runway surveillance to prevent aircraft incursions.

This FAA reauthorization will continue to make significant investments in our nation's airports. For communities in West Virginia, having modern airports is absolutely critical to our future. I am pleased that we will be able to provide over \$3 billion a year in infrastructure support for our nation's airports.

This bill reforms the Essential Air Service (EAS) program in a smart, targeted way. These reforms, as passed, will save over \$20 million a year. As I am sure everyone has heard me say, EAS is the lifeblood for so many small communities. This bill preserves small community access to our national aviation system.

Before I conclude my remarks, I want to thank my colleagues for all of their diligent work on this bill. Let me be clear. We would not be here today were it not for the efforts of Senate Majority Leader Reid and his guidance and leadership. He and his team negotiated the most sensitive part of this conference report. I personally want to thank Senator Reid for his stalwart support throughout this process.

I cannot adequately express my gratitude for Senator Hutchison's efforts over the last four years to get this bill passed into law. Although she was fully engaged in every part of the conference report's development, most notably, her work on securing a slots agreement removed one of the biggest hurdles in getting this legislation through the Senate. Her aviation expertise and negotiating skills are truly remarkable. This bill is another significant part of her already substantial legacy on aviation.

A year ago, Senator Cantwell assumed the chairmanship of the Aviation Subcommittee. Before she could even hold a hearing, the FAA bill was on the Senate floor. She has worked tirelessly to get this bill done. She made substantial contributions to the entire bill, but most notably on NextGen. This bill marks the first of many important contributions that she has made to aviation policy.

Over the last year, I have gotten to know Chairman Mica. I know that he wanted this bill done as much as anyone. He has worked doggedly on aviation issues over his 20-year career. I appreciate his willingness to make tough decisions. It goes without saying how crucial his efforts have been to getting us here today.

Finally, I want to thank my friend Nick Rahall. I cannot say enough about him. He is a quiet but relentless defender of all things West Virginian and things that benefit West Virginia. He made a clear contribution to holding this process together when things were very bleak. I am always delighted and gratified when we are standing shoulder to shoulder fighting for West Virginia.

We all should be proud of this conference report. It will enable our aviation system to move forward to meet the challenges of continuously improving safety, air traffic control modernization, airport development, and small community air service.

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