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Statement of

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Gulfport, Mississippi

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to be a part of this panel to discuss the benefits of air service to the employers and work force of the Mississippi Gulf Coast area. As Director of the John C. Stennis Space Center (SSC), I can assure the Subcommittee that access to a variety of air service options is vital to NASA and the other agencies resident at SSC in the accomplishment of our various missions.

NASA's mission is to understand and protect our home planet, to explore the universe and search for life, and to inspire the next generation of explorers, as only NASA can. This undertaking has been augmented by the Vision for Space Exploration, announced in January, which calls for a sustained and affordable human and robotic program to explore the solar system and beyond.

The John C. Stennis Space Center has key roles to play in making the Vision for Space Exploration a reality. It is NASA's primary center for testing and certifying rocket propulsion systems for the Space Shuttle and future generations of space vehicles. Because of its important role in engine testing for four decades, Stennis Space Center is NASA's program manager for rocket propulsion testing with responsibility for conducting and/or managing all NASA large scale propulsion test programs.

In addition to rocket propulsion, the Earth Science Applications Directorate at SSC is an important element of the NASA Vision for Space Exploration. The Directorate performs

an important function within the Agency's Earth Science Enterprise by matching NASA's scientific and technical knowledge with issues of national concern. Through partnerships with federal, state, local, academic and non-profit organizations, public and private sector decision makers learn how to apply new technologies to critical environmental, resource management, community growth and disaster management issues. Perhaps most relevant to the purpose of this hearing is SSC's unique structure. Stennis began "reinventing government" years ago, after NASA completed testing Saturn V engines for the Apollo program in the early 1970s. Since that time, SSC has evolved into a unique federal and commercial city that is home to more than 30 federal, state, academic and private organizations and numerous technology-based companies. NASA serves as the host agency, and all resident agencies share in the cost of common infrastructure, services and capabilities -- producing a synergy that makes Stennis a national model of teamwork and government cost effectiveness.

SSC is a significant source of employment and income in the local area. In 2003, the SSC work force totaled 4,524, with 38 percent dedicated to scientific and engineering fields. The Department of Defense is the largest employer at SSC, with more than 2,000 uniformed, civilian and contractor personnel. The U.S. Navy's presence at SSC includes the Naval Oceanography and Meteorology Command, the Naval Oceanographic Office, the Naval Research Laboratory, the Naval Small Craft Instruction and Technical Training School and Special Boat Team 22.

With an average annual salary of $76,000, including fringe benefits, SSC's direct global economic impact in 2003 was $755 million, with a $533 million direct economic impact on the 50-miles radius surrounding the Center. With your permission, Mr. Chairman, I am enclosing as part of my written testimony additional information on SSC's economic impact for 2003 and a listing of SSC resident agencies.

Considering the critical missions of its resident agencies and size of its work force, SSC relies upon the availability, frequency and affordability of direct (non-stop) or one-stop flights between nearby airports and national and international destinations in the performance of these missions. Commercial air service is currently available to SSC employees at two airports, the Gulfport-Biloxi Regional Airport and New Orleans' Louis Armstrong International Airport. The Gulfport-Biloxi Airport is located about 35 miles east of SSC, with a driving time of less than 45 minutes. The New Orleans airport is located about 55 miles west of SSC with a driving time of approximately 90 minutes.

Statistics for official business flights by Stennis employees during fiscal year 2003 indicate that a majority of flights originate from the New Orleans airport, although the number of flights from Gulfport-Biloxi is increasing. The airport locations utilized by Stennis agencies are largely budget driven, and government travel regulations require federal agencies to use GSA "city pair" contracts when available. Although statistics are not available for all SSC agencies, I will summarize the official airline travel statistics for NASA and Navy employees at SSC.

Official business travel by NASA/Stennis employees in fiscal year 2003 amounted to 805 airline tickets at a total cost of $240,000. Approximately 73% of the NASA business flights were out of New Orleans and approximately 27% out of Gulfport-Biloxi. These figures represent an increase over previous years in the use of Gulfport-Biloxi airport, as additional government seating has become available. In addition, round-trip airfare from Gulfport to Washington, D.C. is currently lower than the rate from New Orleans. The top three destinations for NASA /Stennis travelers in FY 2003, in terms of frequency, were (1) Washington, DC; (2) Orlando, FL and (3) Houston, TX.

Official business travel by Navy/Stennis personnel amounted to 4409 tickets in fiscal year 2003 at a total cost of $2.6 million. Approximately 70% of the Navy business flights were out of New Orleans, 20% were out of Gulfport-Biloxi, and 10% out of other cities. Because a large percentage of Navy personnel travel to international destinations, the New Orleans airport currently offers more options. The top three domestic destinations for Navy/Stennis travelers in FY 2003, in terms of frequency, were (1) San Diego, CA, (2) Norfolk/Virginia Beach, VA and (3) Washington, DC.

The Stennis workforce also has access to a general aviation airport operated by the Hancock County Port and Harbor Commission. Stennis International Airport is located 7 miles east of SSC, with a driving time of less than 20 minutes. Because of its close proximity to SSC, this airport is the preferred venue for Government- and corporate-owned or chartered aircraft carrying SSC visitors or employees. On occasion, Lakefront Airport located in east New Orleans is used as an alternative landing site for such aircraft. The Stennis International Airport also accommodates large cargo aircraft that are often required for defense or industrial missions of SSC resident agencies.

When approached by organizations considering Stennis as a possible location for their activities, it is NASA's responsibility, as host agency, to determine whether the Center can satisfy their occupancy requirements. In nearly every instance, one of the primary considerations of a potential resident agency -- beyond the Center's ability to accommodate its needs -- is the accessibility and availability of air service, whether for passenger or cargo purposes. One example is Lockheed Martin's Mississippi Space and Technology Center, a commercial operation that the company opened in 2002 at SSC, through a partnership with the State of Mississippi. Lockheed Martin uses this facility to design and produce propulsion and thermal control systems for its commercial satellite program and to perform metrology, calibration and other technical services for its customers. For this activity, Lockheed Martin required access to an airport capable of accommodating large cargo aircraft, and the Stennis International Airport effectively satisfied that requirement.

Another recent example involves NASA's decision to consolidate its business operations at one location. Early this year, NASA field centers were invited to submit proposals to become the site for the NASA Shared Services Center (NSSC), where all transactional elements of NASA's procurement, financial management, information technology and human resources functions would be performed. NASA identified the availability and accessibility of round-trip flight services as one of the scored factors that would be

considered in siting the NSSC. Specifically, the proposal guidance stated that the "frequency and cost of direct (non-stop) or one-stop flights between the airport (near the NSSC site) and other NASA locations are crucial to maintain and improve service responsiveness of the NSSC." NASA requested that all NSSC site proposals include supporting data such as the number of direct and one-stop flights per week to each NASA Center and the cost and estimated travel times to each NASA Center. Although NASA's site selection decision for the NSSC has not yet been made, I am pleased to report that Stennis submitted a proposal which reflected the excellent air service options available at Gulfport-Biloxi, New Orleans, and Stennis International to satisfy the NSSC accessibility requirements.

A recent cost study conducted by SSC's Executive Committee on the feasibility of pursuing a charter service with weekly flights to the Washington, D.C. area to serve the travel needs of SSC employees to that location indicated that the current level of SSC flight requirements do not justify the cost of such service. However, any sizeable increase in the SSC population could result in a different conclusion.

I would like to note that NASA's Aeronautics Enterprise is performing research that will improve accessibility to our nation's airports, big and small. The Airspace Systems program is developing technologies for revolutionary improvements to, and modernization of, the National Airspace System, as well as the introduction of new systems for vehicles whose operation can take advantage of the improved, modern air transportation system. The customers for this technology are the Federal Aviation Administration, state and local airport authorities, personal aviation operators and the aircraft developers. The primary objectives are to maximize operational throughput, predictability, efficiency, flexibility, and access into the airspace system while maintaining safety and environmental protection. The resultant benefit to the user will be reduced flight delays and trip durations. The goal of one project, called the Small Aircraft Transportation System, or SATS, is to develop key flight deck and flight path technologies that enable the demonstration of the technical and operational feasibility of the capabilities for precision guidance and improved reliability of small aircraft. SATS will enable near all-weather operations by new generations of aircraft at virtually any landing facility in the nation. Hopefully, with the incorporation of these technologies in the National Airspace System, all types of air transportation servicing SSC and the surrounding region would benefit.

In summary, those of us who work at Stennis Space Center and live in the surrounding counties and parishes appreciate the quality of air service that is currently available in this region, not only for official business travel but for personal travel as well. At the same time, we are actively involved with economic development organizations and other members of the community to fully exploit the taxpayers' investments in Stennis Space Center by increasing the number of jobs and resident agencies at the Center. We, therefore, support the examination of any options that would improve the variety and availability of air services in order to support growth at Stennis Space Center and the entire region.