



Testimony of

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Before the

Committee on Commerce, Science, &
Transportation
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– On –

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Good morning, Chair Cantwell, Ranking Member Cruz, and members of the committee. As chair of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), I thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to provide an update regarding the NTSB's activities.

The NTSB is an independent federal agency charged by Congress with investigating every civil aviation accident in the United States and significant events in the other modes of transportation—railroad, transit, highway, marine, pipeline, and commercial space. We determine the probable causes of the accidents and events we investigate, and issue safety recommendations aimed at preventing future occurrences. In addition, we conduct transportation safety research studies and offer information and other assistance to family members and survivors for each accident or event we investigate. We also serve as the appellate authority for enforcement actions involving aviation and mariner certificates issued by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and US Coast Guard, and we adjudicate appeals of civil penalty actions taken by the FAA.

Our current investigative workload includes over 1,200 active investigations in 47 states and Puerto Rico, in addition to supporting more than 140 foreign investigations in over 50 countries. Throughout a typical year, we work on about 2,200 domestic and 450 foreign cases, and we expect the number of cases annually to remain high and continue to increase in complexity. The vast majority of these are aviation accidents being investigated by staff from our four regional offices. They also include major investigations, such as the in-flight structural failure of a Boeing 737-9 MAX over Portland, Oregon; the derailment of a Norfolk Southern train in East Palestine, Ohio; and multiple runway incursion and other near-miss incidents at airports across the country.

Some investigations, understandably, get more public attention than others, but all of our investigations are critical for improving transportation safety. We know that we owe it to the families of those involved, to the communities where events occurred, and to the traveling public to find out what happened, why it happened, and to make recommendations to help ensure it never happens again. Some of our other significant ongoing investigations include the following:

- Natural gas-fueled home explosions and fires in Jackson, Mississippi
- A multivehicle crash, including a motorcoach carrying members of a high school band in Etna, Ohio
- A multivehicle crash between a motorcoach and tractor-trailers parked along a rest area ramp in Highland, Illinois
- A student struck by a truck while getting off a stopped school bus in Excelsior, Wisconsin
- A truck colliding with a group of bicyclists in Goodyear, Arizona
- A tanker truck rollover and rupture with anhydrous ammonia release in

- Teutopolis, Illinois
- An electric bus fire in Indianapolis, Indiana
- A Chicago Transit Authority train collision with a snow removal machine in Chicago, Illinois
- Multiple rail employee fatalities in Ohio, Massachusetts, and North Carolina
- A coal train derailment off a bridge over Interstate 25 in Pueblo West, Colorado
- A hot air balloon accident in Eloy, Arizona
- A mid-air collision at the Wings Over Dallas airshow in Dallas, Texas

As I testified before this committee in November of last year, our Office of Aviation Safety currently has six investigations open into runway incursion events that occurred in 2023 alone.

- On January 13, 2023, an American Airlines 777 crossed an active runway at JFK without clearance, causing a Delta 737 to abort takeoff. The two aircraft came within 1,400 feet of each other, putting 308 lives at risk.
- On January 23, 2023, a United Airlines flight at Inouye International Airport in Hawaii crossed the same runway where a Kamaka Air flight was landing. The aircraft came within 1,173 feet of each other, putting 303 lives at risk.
- On February 4, 2023, a Southwest passenger jet and a FedEx cargo plane were less than 200 feet from colliding at Austin-Bergstrom International Airport in Texas, putting 131 people in danger.
- On February 16, 2023, in Sarasota, Florida, an Air Canada Rouge A-321 was cleared for takeoff from the same runway where an American Airlines B-737 was cleared to land. The two planes came within 3,168 feet of each other, putting 372 lives at risk.
- On February 22, 2023, in Burbank, California, a Mesa Airlines jet initiated a go-around while a SkyWest jet was still departing the runway. The two planes came within 300 feet of each other, putting 118 lives at risk.
- On August 11, 2023, a Cessna business jet and a Southwest Airlines flight came close to colliding at San Diego International Airport. The planes were about 100 feet from each other, putting at least 117 lives at risk.

We are also investigating a collision that occurred on October 24, 2023, in which a Hawker 850XP airplane collided with a Cessna 510 airplane at William P. Hobby International Airport in Houston, Texas.

In addition, over the last year we have completed many significant and complex investigations and issued safety recommendations in all modes to prevent tragedies similar to those I mentioned. These completed investigations were tragedies that occurred in some of your states or that involved your constituents, such as the following:

- A crash between a pickup truck and a transit van carrying members of the University of the Southwest's golf team—from Hobbs, New Mexico—in Andrews,

Texas

- A pipeline rupture and crude oil release in Edwardsville, Illinois
- A grade-crossing collision between a Metra commuter train and a box truck in Clarendon Hills, Illinois
- Incidents involving fishing vessels in Alaska and Texas
- Rail and transit employee fatalities in Texas, Colorado, and Illinois
- A multivehicle crash in North Las Vegas
- An airplane crash into Mutiny Bay in Washington
- A grade-crossing collision between an Amtrak train (*Southwest Chief*) and a dump truck in Mendon, Missouri
- An Amtrak train (*Empire Builder*) derailment in Joplin, Montana
- A Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority accident in Boston, Massachusetts
- A wrong-way driving crash between a service truck and a motorcoach on Interstate 20 in Big Spring, Texas
- A natural gas-fuel explosion and fire in Coolidge, Arizona
- A multivehicle collision in Phoenix, Arizona
- A train derailment in Raymond, Minnesota

We currently have over a thousand open safety recommendations across all modes as a result of our investigations. In 2022 and 2023, we issued 159 new safety recommendations and closed 261. Of those closed, excluding those that were classified reconsidered, no longer applicable, and superseded, 192 (80 percent) were closed acceptably, meaning that the recommendation recipient took action to implement the safety recommendation. This success rate demonstrates the value of our recommendations. Our recommendations are meaningful, and we appreciate the efforts of recipients to address them, even when it literally takes an act of Congress to make it happen.

For example, we are pleased that, as Congress works to complete FAA reauthorization, this committee has included provisions to address our recommendations to require 25-hour cockpit voice recorders on new and existing aircraft; to improve air tour safety and remove regulatory loopholes that allow lower standards of safety for some paying passengers; to ensure that the FAA completes its rulemaking to address the hazards unmarked towers present to agricultural and other general aviation aircraft; to reduce turbulence; to improve aviation safety in Alaska; and to improve runway safety.

We also appreciate the committee's efforts to reauthorize the NTSB as part of the FAA reauthorization. Unfortunately, we need even more funding to continue our important and life-saving work. The president's fiscal year (FY) 2024 budget request for the NTSB proposed \$145 million, and we anticipate \$150 million in the president's budget for FY 2025, which is still lower than the NTSB's reauthorization proposal, but higher than the House and Senate reauthorization levels. The current House FAA reauthorization legislation authorizes \$142 million for FY 2024, and \$145 million for FY 2025, with at least \$5 million per year increases in the following years. In contrast, the

current Senate FAA reauthorization, recently passed by this committee, flat funds the NTSB at \$145 million, \$5 million less than the president's expected budget request, beginning in FY 2025. These authorization levels proposed by the Senate, if appropriated, would require us to reduce staffing levels and would degrade our mission readiness for critical safety investigations, such as our East Palestine investigation, Portland investigation, and the many other investigations I mentioned. I urge this committee to take advantage of the conference process to raise authorization levels to meet the needs outlined in the NTSB's reauthorization proposal.

The NTSB is a small agency relative to our federal partners, in terms of the size of our budget and our workforce, but, as our recommendation implementation success rate shows, our impact is profound. Everyone at the NTSB plays a role in achieving our mission to make transportation safer. The reauthorization proposal we sent to Congress last year represents a modest downpayment on the investments in the skilled workforce and enhanced authorities our agency needs to boost transportation safety nationwide and across all transportation modes. Our dynamic workforce includes the following:

- Investigators who go to the scene of an investigation and those who work in our laboratories
- Family assistance specialists who support victims and their families
- Writers who develop our reports and help craft our safety recommendations
- Advocates for our safety recommendations who track those recommendations' progress in industry, the states, and at federal agencies, and who work to ensure implementation
- Administrative and human resources officers who support our ability to recruit, retain, and train our workforce and make sure we acquire and manage our resources responsibly
- Those who keep our technology up-to-date and reliable
- Judges and legal counsel who decide pilots' and mariners' certification appeals
- Communications professionals who share the agency's work with the public and our stakeholders

Their hard work, professionalism, and dedication is the reason that the NTSB is regarded as the world's preeminent safety agency, and one of the best places to work in the federal government.

To continue as the world's preeminent safety agency, completing our investigations and developing recommendations that advance safety changes without delays, we must meet the challenges that come with increasing growth and innovation in transportation. Therefore, it is critical for the agency to have additional resources to respond to events without affecting our timeliness, the quality of our work, or our independence.

We currently have 230 investigators across all modes and would need to add over 50 more specialists to be fully staffed today. Those specialists include, at a minimum the

following:

- 16 aviation investigators
- 10 highway investigators
- 3 marine investigators
- 10 pipeline and hazardous materials investigators
- 5 rail investigators

This does not even begin to address staffing needs in our support offices.

In the NTSB laboratory, we would need an additional 12 employees to fill current vacancies. Those vacancies include a medical investigator, research analysts, materials engineers, and vehicle performance and recorder specialists. The lab also needs an additional \$2.4 million to replace aging and obsolete equipment, which is critical to conducting robust and comprehensive investigations. Funding below our requests would reverse the progress made on enhancing our workforce and improving the timeliness of our investigations and issuance of safety recommendations.

These resources will allow us to hire professionals with the required skills, to purchase the equipment necessary for those skilled professionals to do their jobs, and to invest in crucial staff training and development. Our workforce is our greatest asset and is essential to our mission.

As you consider the NTSB's reauthorization and our appropriations, I request that Congress support our ability to carry out our critical safety mission now and in the future; to recruit, retain, and develop a highly qualified, specialized, diverse, and inclusive workforce; and to prepare the agency for investigations involving emerging transportation technologies and systems to improve transportation safety.