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DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION AND PUBLIC FACILITIES

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Testimony of John Torgerson, Deputy Commissioner
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

The State of Alaska operates 258 Airports, ranging in size from the Ted Stevens Anchorage International, Fairbanks International, to small community Airports. Of the rural Airport system, 47 are paved, 173 are gravel of which 72 runways are less than 3,000 feet. Today, I will confine my remarks primarily to those issues that impact our rural communities and allow Mort Plum, our Airport Director for Anchorage to testify on that system.

I would start by expressing our thanks to the FAA for its ongoing, cooperative relationship with the state over the years. We have found that our agencies share a common mission of providing the infrastructure for air transportation in a very large, difficult, area. The willingness of the staff at FAA to face these challenges together with their state counterparts continues to produce mutual benefits.

ESSENTIAL AIR SERVICE

I would like to recognize your support for the Essential Air Service, and thank you for that continued support. This program remains a critical support for safe, scheduled passenger service to 39 Alaska communities, out of over 200 communities that are eligible. In some cases, the service made possible by this program is the only way that many Alaskans can get the medical help and other vital services that they need.

RUNWAY LIGHTING

The state has a strategic goal to improve runways to a 24-hour VFR standard in communities that depend on air medical evacuation. A Congressional study conducted in 1999 identified 63 communities that relied on aviation access for medical evacuations and did not have 24-hour VFR capable airports. These 63 airports are our highest priority for providing 24 hour VFR capability.

From FFY'02 through FFY'06, Congress made special Alaska Rural Airport Lighting appropriations of \$38 million to the FAA for the lighting and navigation improvements to Alaska's airports. We have worked cooperatively with the FAA to apply these monies to the communities on the list of deficient airports to install lighting and navigation systems.

With these special appropriations, we have improved medical access by deploying portable emergency lights for helicopter landing zones at all communities. These lights facilitate safer evacuation by Coast Guard and National Guard helicopters in medical emergency evacuations. Civilian operators have also become certified to use these portable lights.

For fixed wing land based operations, at a minimum, an adequate runway and runway edge lights are needed for 24 hour VFR operations. Preferably, runway edge lights, rotating beacon, end identifier lights, and precision approach path indicators, installed on a 3,300-foot or longer runway, will be developed as a package to allow 24-hour VFR access with maximum safety. Unfortunately, many Alaskan village airports are not suitable in their current condition for installing permanent lighting and require first making significant improvements to their length, width and surface condition to support nighttime aircraft operations.

Since 1999 we have improved 29 of the 63 airports to 24-hour VFR standards. Of these 29 completed airports, there were 9 airports that required major reconstruction or relocation in order to support the 24 hour access standard, due to their substandard condition. Another 6 airports will be improved to meet the 24 hour VFR access standard by fall of this year, with 5 of these airports requiring major reconstruction or relocation. By the fall of 2008, another 5 airports requiring major reconstruction or relocation are expected to be improved to meet the 24 hour VFR access standard. In addition to a portion of the \$38 million in special Rural Alaska Lighting funding appropriated to FAA, we will have allocated approximately \$150 million in AIP funding to bring these 40 airports up to 24 hour VFR standards by 2008.

Twenty-two additional communities await a permanent 24 hour VFR solution for completion beyond 2008, because most of them will require major airport construction, reconstruction or relocation to meet the standards for safe nighttime operations, we currently estimate that more than \$300 million will be required to improve these additional 22 community airports to provide 24 hour VFR access.

The continuing support of Congress is greatly appreciated in meeting this vital goal of providing 24 hour VFR capable airports to these communities.

SAFETY

The FAA and all of those in the aviation community in Alaska should be commended for their efforts in aviation safety. The reduction in incidents/accidents that has been achieved in Alaska is remarkable. The Capstone program has contributed to this reduction, as well as achieving a large improvement in access for aviation in Alaska. This improved access results from the fact that better weather reporting means better IFR success rate, and therefore more completed flights. The State of Alaska fully supports an accelerated transition to a new national airspace system using space-based navigational aids.

Also, the Medallion program has made a significant contribution to aviation safety. You will hear much about the good this program has done, but simply stated, since many state employees fly to all corners of the state, we all look for the Medallion logo on each airplane we board.

TSA

We in Alaska are as concerned about transportation security as any state in the nation. We fully support the efforts to protect the traveler and our nation's security. We have many transportation assets, such as the oil pipeline and terminal, the Port of Anchorage, the oil fields, and others, the loss or disruption of which would be a severe blow to our state and the country.

As it is currently structured, the TSA has three separate organizations in Alaska. We believe that the three organizations could be streamlined into one to provide consistent security oversight within Alaska.

We believe, also, that at Alaska's rural airports, transportation security can be achieved in a more efficient manner than at present. Transportation security programs at these airports should be based on threat analysis.

As transportation security is presently implemented at Alaska's rural airports, oftentimes the number of TSA employees outnumbers other airport employees. If a threat-based approach were used, security interests in Alaska could be met with considerably less investment.

AIP PROGRAM

With your help Mr. Chairman, the AIP program has grown from \$126 million to \$184 million in the last five years. Alaska has benefited tremendously from the AIP program, particularly in our rural communities, where airports are our highways, and Alaskans are grateful.

This is not to say that we don't have unmet needs. The cost of construction in rural Alaska is expensive. At most locations, the materials and equipment needed to construct an airport must be barged in from hundreds of miles away during a very short summer construction season. As communities grow and everyone focuses on improved levels of service such as those identified in the 1999 medical access study, we could easily double our AIP spending and still find ourselves behind.

Although Congress has not completed its work on the FFY'07 AIP budget, I would like to express my concerns regarding the impacts the President's proposed budget would have on Alaska's Rural Airport System. Under the President's proposed reduced funding levels, for the Rural System (Non Discretionary funding only) we could have an estimated 43.5% decrease in Primary funding and a 22.6% decrease in Non Primary funding available compared to our estimated FFY'06 funding levels. The Alaska International Airport System and all Discretionary funding are excluded from these calculations. The House recently passed an AIP appropriations bill at the \$3.7 billion level, which is the maximum allowed under the AIP Authorization Bill, Vision 100. We encourage the Senate to consider the House AIP appropriations bill and authorize the maximum appropriation set in Vision 100.

WETLANDS

The application of the National Environmental Policy Act, as well as section 4(f) of the Department of Transportation Act of 1966 (49 U.S.C. 303(c)), to all airports, including rural airports, needs to be clarified. At some point in time a decision was made to designate a piece of ground as an airport. It seems that designation identifies the dominant use, and clearly specifies the objective for the designated land.

I am not advocating running roughshod over the environment as these airports are developed. I am advocating common sense application of NEPA, Sec. 4(f), and other environmental laws to lands that have been long designated for airport purposes. A great deal of time and money is spent on living up to the letter of the law. Stringent application of these laws results in added cost and protracted delays in needed projects. Recognition of the primary purpose of lands designated as airports should be incorporated into the implementation of environmental laws at airports. For some of our rural airports improvements, we are being required to develop a full Environmental Impact Statement. We believe that the small footprints of disturbance from our rural airport construction should allow us to conduct environmental assessments, rather than a full NEPA Environmental Impact Statement.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT DEVELOPMENT

The current FAA regulations do not allow State Aviation Organization sponsors to conduct the Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) required for certain types of aviation projects judged to have significant impacts.

Currently, all required EIS's must be managed by the FAA. Recently authorized through the passage of TEA-LU, the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) allows State Transportation Organizations such as ADOT&PF to manage EIS's to completion. We recommend that consideration be given to changing FAA regulations to allow knowledgeable sponsors such as ADOT&PF to conduct EIS's with FAA oversight as currently done with Environmental Assessments.

The Airports Division staff at FAA review and comment on all Environmental Assessments (EA) and Categorical Exclusion (CE) documents, but does not typically write environmental documents. Consequently, their level of expertise at environmental documentation may be less than the State Transportation Organization staff who routinely write EA's and CE's for aviation and highway projects as well as EIS documents for highway projects. This can lengthen the amount of time needed to conduct the EIS as well as the fact that there are relatively few FAA staff to manage EIS's and also review and approve EA's and CE's. We at ADOT&PF believe that we can move the EIS'S more expeditiously through the process. Empowering the State Transportation Organizations in the EIS process will also make them better able to respond to other agencies, the public and the project proponents.

CLOSING

Mr. Chairman, as you are well aware, no other state in the nation has greater dependence on aviation and the associated airport improvements as the principal means, and for vast portions of Alaska the only practical means, of year round access to our communities and residents. This dependence on aviation and airports provides Alaska with a unique perspective on the need for airport improvements and their relative priority in meeting critical system wide airport needs through the AIP. If I or the staff of the Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities can be of assistance in helping your Committee consider changes necessary to the FAA Reauthorization bill, we would welcome the opportunity to provide any assistance requested.

From our international airports on down to the smallest village strip, our airport system is simply crucial to the state's economy, local economies, and the health and well being of all Alaskans.

Alaskans appreciate the continuing support of the FAA and the Congress for aviation in Alaska.

I thank you for the opportunity today, and will answer any questions the members may have for me.

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