STATEMENT OF J. RANDOLPH BABBITT, ADMINISTRATOR OF THE FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE AND TRANSPORTATION, SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION, ON AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL SAFETY OVERSIGHT, MAY 24, 2011.

Chairwoman Cantwell, Senator Thune, Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the issues facing the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) air traffic control safety oversight. Several recent incidents and reports have called into question the safety of our nation's airspace and the professionalism of our air traffic controllers. Obviously, as Administrator, the fact that these incidents occurred and that these questions are being asked is extremely disturbing. Today I will describe the actions that we have taken to address the areas of concern. I want every Member of this Committee to understand how committed Secretary LaHood and I are to working with National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) and our controllers to ensure the safety of the system. I believe our nation's air traffic controllers are dedicated and professional and a key reason why we have the safest aviation system in the world. But we can always improve, and therefore cannot tolerate lapses in judgment when it comes to safety.

In recent weeks, I have been traveling across the country with senior FAA leadership and Paul Rinaldi, the President of NATCA, along with his leadership team, on a Call to Action on Air Traffic Control Safety and Professionalism. The FAA's safety mandate is a tremendous responsibility and air traffic controllers are on the front lines of that mandate, day in and day out. We oversee the safe transportation of nearly two million people per day. That is why recent events have been so troubling. I have been very direct in the conversations I have been

having with the FAA's workforce. Any incident that calls into question the professionalism of air traffic controllers cannot and will not be tolerated.

Together with NATCA, I have communicated that, even though we do the right thing over 99.9% of the time, we have to do better. We cannot have the flying public believe, even for an instant, that they cannot trust the men and women who are responsible for getting them to their destination safely. So I am asking the workforce to rededicate ourselves to the concept of professionalism. I am calling on all employees to be responsible, not only for our own actions, but for helping to ensure that our colleagues are also committed to excellence. I want to create a safety culture that makes it imperative to report and correct any potentially unsafe condition or action.

I am happy to report that we are working hand in hand with NATCA in our efforts. We both recognize that air traffic controllers have traditionally enjoyed a great deal of respect and admiration, and we do not want to see that perception of their profession tarnished. NATCA's leadership is willing to work hard with us to demonstrate a united front in demanding a new level of excellence. I am proud that FAA's relationship with NATCA has improved to the point where this joint effort is possible. A few years ago, it might not have been. I think we can all agree that working together toward a goal achieves a better result than working at odds.

As this Committee knows, I have been working with the aviation industry since shortly after I became Administrator on the concept of professionalism, and I think we have made some progress in making it a priority. It only makes sense to extend this conversation to the controller workforce. What do I think professionalism means? It means doing the right thing all of the time, even when no one is looking. It means following procedures and ensuring

compliance with safety standards. It means looking out for each other and making sure that you correct colleagues who are not upholding these standards. The business of air traffic control is a tremendous responsibility, and I know that the controllers feel that responsibility. That is why they also need to feel that they are supported.

This means, on the management side, that we have a responsibility to address the areas of risk that have been identified. For example, we are looking at how to deal with fatigue, which as this Committee knows is a particularly difficult issue. Part of it is staffing, part of it is scheduling, part of it is education and, yes, part of it is professional responsibility. FAA has been focused on mitigating controller fatigue since well before the recently reported incidents. FAA and NATCA conducted a joint, in-depth assessment of controller fatigue, risks and mitigations beginning in the fall of 2010. Twelve recommendations are currently under consideration as a result of that review. We want to ensure that we fully understand the impact of any changes made before we make them.

Since the reported incidents, there was an immediate agreement to allow for more recuperative time between shifts; a minimum of 9 hours in between all shifts. In addition, two air traffic controllers are required on duty during the midnight shift at 27 control towers across the country where only one controller had been scheduled previously, including Reagan National Airport here in Washington, D.C. Other scheduling changes have been implemented to accommodate this change without immediately hiring additional controllers. The FAA Academy will expand and update its fatigue management training to help controllers recognize, avoid, and combat fatigue. Not all of the changes are universally welcomed. But I am convinced that adding an extra layer of safety is the right thing to do.

The science of fatigue management for air traffic controllers is still an emerging discipline. There will undoubtedly be continued insights about how to mitigate fatigue and improve safety. Our challenge is to implement the benefit of new insights while still being good stewards of the taxpayer dollar. I look forward to sharing how FAA will move forward in this vital effort.

The recent incidents have come at a time when we have seen an overall increase in the reporting of controller operational errors. This is a serious and complex issue for the FAA and one I would like to take a moment to discuss.

For many years now, the aviation industry has been collecting data provided voluntarily by airline employees that it and the FAA have been analyzing. There is universal agreement that having access to safety information we would otherwise not know about has allowed us to identify trends and better understand the areas of risk that exist in the system so that we can focus our collective efforts on minimizing those risks. The FAA believes that this approach has already contributed to the remarkable decline of commercial aviation accidents; a decline of 82% since the late 1990s. With that kind of recognized success, it only makes sense to look for a way to expand this approach to air traffic control.

In late 2009, the FAA implemented confidential reporting systems and incentives for controllers to provide information directly to supervisors. We were seeking to achieve the same gains in knowledge and awareness of safety conditions in the air traffic control system that we did with the airlines. The reporting program we implemented, the Air Traffic Safety Action Program (ATSAP), was similar to those applicable for airlines. Further, we deployed additional technology to collect safety data. It is certainly fair to note that when the airlines

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implemented confidential reporting and improved flight data recording systems, the safety data available increased by a factor of 10 or more, so there was certainly an expectation that some significant increase in data reported with regard to air traffic would result. The important thing to remember is that this is data that we want. This is data that we need. This is data that will save lives.

The above noted changes generated over 28,000 confidential safety reports made to ATSAP on numerous safety issues. Although ATSAP filings do not get counted as operational errors, FAA believes that the improved recording systems combined with the overall safety culture that ATSAP and other programs are designed to foster, are at least partially responsible for the 53% increase in the number of losses of separation between FY 2009 and FY 2010.

The majority of the time, errors and other safety reports provide the FAA with knowledge critical to identifying and correcting potential risk. The more events the FAA is made aware of, whether through digital recording programs or voluntary reporting systems, the greater the opportunity to resolve the conditions that resulted in those errors. The only way to address system risk is to have as much data available as possible to identify problem areas, determine root cause and apply sustainable correction. We are now poised to tackle the task of fundamentally addressing the issues that contribute to operational errors and other safety occurrences.

But voluntary disclosure doesn't necessarily provide everything we need, which is why we are also relying on technology to inform us of errors that might otherwise not get reported. We have begun using the Traffic Analysis Review Program (TARP), a new software tool that will automatically detect losses of separation, collect data, and report them directly to FAA's

quality assurance group for analysis. TARP covers the Terminal area, where we have the highest degree of congestion. A similar system was implemented in the En Route environment several years ago. While we are still discussing the implementation of this program with NATCA, we anticipate its use on a 24/7 basis within this fiscal year.

An important thing to note is that all operational errors are not created equal. Most operational errors are categorized through a system that reflects how much of the safety zone was breached. Most errors are classified based on severity as A, B, or C, with A being the closest in range and C the furthest apart. Errors in the A category are generally the most troubling. Other losses are classified as "Other" or "miscellaneous" in order to capture those errors where such precise measurements are not possible, for example, non-radar, oceanic, terrain, procedural or equipment errors.

The table below is based on FAA data collections on separation events since 2007. The large increase in reports filed between the end of 2009 and the end of 2010 is concurrent with the implementation of voluntary reporting programs and additional electronic data collection.

Category	FY 2007	FY 2008	FY 2009	FY 2010
A	34	28	37	43
B	256	318	292	400
C	557	663	618	1059
Other	193	340	286	385
Total	1040	1349	1233	1887

In 2010, 1887 errors were reported, of which 443 were classified as A or B. To put these numbers in context, there were more than 133 million Tower, Tracon and En Route air traffic control operations during the same time period in 2010. While the data has not been subject to a statistical validation or significance test, it appears that error rates in the most serious incident categories (A and B) are lower than the overall error rate. I think it is fair to say that, while any error is troubling and taken very seriously, the numbers above suggest that these types of errors are a relatively a rare event.

So in conclusion, I would like to reiterate two important points. First and foremost, the types of controller incidents that have reflected poorly on the FAA's dedication to its safety mission are being addressed aggressively, and, where possible, collaboratively to identify and mitigate risks, whether they stem from scheduling, staffing, technology, training or a combination of thereof. Second, I am committed to obtaining the most information possible to understand how to make the system safer. I take the rise in reported errors very seriously, but it is vital for everyone to understand how important information is. I know how disconcerting it is for the public to hear on the news that there are flaws or risks in the system. But it is essential for the public to put those stories into context and recognize that the safety record of commercial aviation is not an accident – that it is based on the use of critical information, to make informed decisions. These two points work hand in hand. Information is vital to improve safety, but where information discloses inappropriate actions or attitudes, those individuals who cannot meet the standards of professionalism and proficiency that FAA demands will be subject to retraining or replacement, as appropriate.

This has been a difficult time for all of us who are dedicated to aviation safety. Our commitment is strong and enduring. But I am convinced that these challenges give us the

opportunity to move forward in a positive and productive way. I look forward to working with Congress, FAA's workforce, industry and the public to implement improved standards that benefit the safety of a system that is both the most complex and the safest in the world.

That concludes my statement. I will be happy to answer your questions at this time.