

Testimony of Jonathan G. Ornstein

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**Before the United States Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
Subcommittee on Aviation Safety, Operations, and Innovation**

Field Hearing: Developing the Aviation Workforce of the 21st Century

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Chair Sinema and members of the Committee, my name is Jonathan Ornstein and I am the Chairman and CEO of Mesa Airlines based right here in Arizona. I've been CEO for 23 years which makes me the longest serving airline CEO, and probably the dumbest.

Thank you for holding this hearing on such an important issue for our industry and for my opportunity to provide testimony on the matter.

Mesa Air was founded in 1982 in a small airport in Farmington, New Mexico by a true visionary in aviation and my mentor, mechanic Larry Risley.

When I joined the company in 1986 we had 6 aircraft. By 1992, we had over 200 aircraft, with 5000 employees flying to over 300 small communities in 46 states using 19-30 seat aircraft. Then there was a rule change in 1995 that significantly increased our costs. I was outspoken against it at the time and felt it would jeopardize the regional airline industry. At the time there were over 2,500 aircraft in service. Today not a single 19-30 seat regional aircraft provides commercial air service in the US. An entire industry operating into smaller, rural cities such as Bull Head City, Sierra Vista, Show Low, and many more across the country has been entirely wiped out.

While Mesa survived due to the development of the regional jet, the industry is facing almost identical circumstances today as we did 25 years ago. I am deeply concerned about the communities that we serve and more personally, I am deeply concerned about the 3,500 employees at Mesa, many of whom have worked with me for decades.

While Mesa has always looked to the future, and today we are a leader in decarbonization, but unfortunately, if current trends continue, we will be

challenged to be around to see this new technology come to fruition. We have already lost all 19-30 seat commercial passenger aircraft and I fear it will be the 50 seat regional aircraft next. 57% of all airports with commercial service were only served by aircraft with 50-seat or less. We have to prevent this from happening.

Madam Chair, today we find ourselves at a critical juncture for the survival of regional aviation. The flaws of a rule change to the training requirement for pilots made years ago were laid bare during Covid. The resulting pilot shortage now imperils smaller cities and towns that rely on air travel as a vital business and tourism link. These towns are facing either a significant reduction in service or in many cases, the loss of all service entirely. It is estimated that airline service into small communities across the US provides over 1 million jobs, \$41 billion in local wages and tax revenue, and nearly \$153 billion in total economic value.

A clear example of this risk would be the recently announced withdrawal of service by SkyWest — the county's largest and arguably most successful regional airline — from 29 rural cities across America. What is most stunning about this announcement is that all of them received federal subsidies through the Essential Air Service (EAS) program to support that service.

Frankly Madam Chair, I am deeply concerned about what is happening to regional aviation and in particular, to carriers like Mesa. Just to give you an idea of the order of magnitude, last month we lost almost 5% of our pilot workforce as major airlines and operators of larger jets hired our pilots. They are doing this to offset a pilot shortage brought on by COVID related early retirements, a significant increase in retirements due simply to demographics of the pilot workforce, and the substantial expansion in low-cost carriers and cargo operations. Given the significant increase in cost and time required to become a pilot, there are just not enough pilots to go around.

Regional airlines like Mesa are in an incredibly tough spot. Our pilots are exceptionally well trained and qualified, and prime targets for major carriers who are often viewed as career advancement by many young pilots who aspire to fly "big equipment". And given the economics, pilots flying larger aircraft can earn significantly more income flying for these major carriers.

Regional airlines simply cannot keep up with the current level of attrition given the extensive training we perform for each new pilot and more importantly, the shrinking pool of incoming qualified candidates.

For most Americans, regional airports are their first and only option to access the national aviation system. Regional airlines provide service to 65% of the nation's commercially served airports. Unless significant action is taken soon, I believe this critical lifeline is in jeopardy.

According to [federal labor statistics](#), the industry needs to hire an average of 14,500 new pilots each year until 2030 just to keep up. Last year, there were only 4,346 ATP's granted compared to 6,664 in 2019 and 9,387 in 2016. In order to maintain existing service levels, this has to change. If not, the impact will not only be felt on rural aviation as demand increases and supply decreases, but prices for the US consumer will undoubtedly increase until a new equilibrium is reached.

While the US is generally considered a leader in aviation safety, it is interesting to note that no other country in the world has these regulations. Not a single one. And every day, foreign pilots who would be deemed unqualified to fly for a US carrier are flying wide-body international aircraft into JFK and LAX.

While addressing the 1500 hour rule would be the easiest fix, the likelihood of returning to pre-1500-hour rule is remote. We should consider, however, ways to mitigate its effect, and to consider the *quality* of training over the *quantity* of training hours. We have to ask ourselves, whether someone becomes more qualified renting a Cessna 172 and flying circles over the Pacific Ocean for two hours, or spending two hours in a high tech simulator shooting missed approaches into LaGuardia? Why should those hours count one for one?

Given two years from now will be two years too late, what else can be done.

Firstly, we would strongly recommend that Congress reach out to the FAA and encourage them to use the authority that Congress gave them under **the 2010 airline safety act** to create higher quality restricted ATP pathways over pure 1500 hour quantity. Training methods have not been static. With the advancements in training, there is little doubt we are capable producing safer, better qualified pilots without spending upwards to six years, hundreds of thousands of dollars, and flying around in circles for 1,500 hours.

Another effective and actionable solution would be to allow qualified foreign pilots easier entry into the US pilot workforce. Absent the same regulations, many countries around the world are in fact experiencing a surplus of pilots due to COVID-related reductions in international demand. This provides an opportunity to relieve much of the pressure brought on by the current shortage and would allow

carriers to avoid painful reductions in service, maintain a reasonable fare structure, and enhance safety by lowering the velocity of attrition.

It seems slightly absurd that fashion models are given preferred immigration status while qualified pilots — who could provide significant benefit to the national transportation system — are stuck at the border participating in a lottery system. Pilots should have preferential access much like nurses, and indeed fashion models.

Additionally, I recommend raising the maximum pilot age from 65 to 68, even if temporarily. Certainly no one would question their experience.

A longer-term solution but one that may be critical in the coming decade is the support of institutions like United's Aviate Academy. We need strong commitment, and more student aid, to help get more pilots into the system. The high cost of educating new pilots not only limits the number of potential pilots, but significantly hurts any efforts at diversity in the profession which has been, sadly, historically lacking.

Finally, Madam chair I strongly encourage you to request a GAO study of the impact that current regulations have on the pilot shortage and its bearing on local communities. As importantly, this study should also look into how these regulations have exacerbated the lack of pilot diversity, and what steps should be taken to address these problems.

Most of recommendations can be done administratively by the Biden White House and the Department of Transportation, and I respectfully ask you, as Chair of the Aviation Subcommittee, to encourage them to do so.

Members of the Committee, there is not one simple fix that will solve the crisis we are faced with today. I am extremely grateful for the work you and your colleagues did on providing our industry with the lifesaving support of the PSP program. The financial support provided was indispensable in keeping hundreds of thousands of jobs across the country and preventing the potential collapse of US aviation. However, I return to you now not to ask for more money, but to ask for common sense policy changes to reshape our industry in a way that allows us to continue to provide the incredible level of service to hundreds of communities across the country while enhancing safety.

I thank you for your time and look forward to talking more about these solutions throughout the hearing.