



**U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON
COMMERCE, SCIENCE & TRANSPORTATION**
Senator Maria Cantwell, Chair

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

**Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
Nomination Hearing for Michael G. Whitaker to be
Administrator of the Federal Aviation Administration**

Wednesday, October 4, 2023

Opening Statement

[VIDEO](#)

This morning we are here to consider the nomination of Michael G. Whitaker to be the Administrator of the Federal Aviation Administration.

I want to thank Mr. Whitaker for his willingness to serve. I'm also grateful that the House Chairman Rep. Sam Graves is here and we will hear from you soon. Chairman Graves along with Ranking Member Larson, have worked hard on a bipartisan bill and to pass a long-term FAA Reauthorization, so we thank you for that. And I'm hopeful that we'll be about to do the same here in a bipartisan fashion and finalize a bill into law before the end of 2023.

This is a reminder that aviation safety and the job of running the FAA are not partisan endeavors... ensuring strong leadership at the top of America's chief aviation regulator... should be our common goal.

Mr. Whitaker's nomination has attracted broad support, not only from across the aisle, but from across the aviation community. You are supported by the aviation workforce -- pilots, flight attendants, machinists and engineers -- and have broad support from many in the private sector in aviation.

This foundation of support will serve you well because FAA administrator has a big job... over 44,000 workers across multiple lines of business -- from airports to air traffic control

to aviation safety. And each day they help keep Americans moving safely: 25,000 U.S. airline flights carrying 2.5 million passengers, across the country and around the world. Today, you come before the Committee with more than 30 years of diverse experience in aviation, including executive leadership in the private sector and three years serving as FAA Deputy Administrator. You led FAA's modernization of the National Airspace System, known shorthand as NextGen. And I hope you will be able to illuminate today the progress that we've made, important milestones that we've achieved and what we need to do to get it finally implemented.

Mr. Whitaker will bring a commitment to advancing aviation safety. And I appreciate his support by families who have lost loved ones and who have been very dedicated to improving aviation safety.

But there are challenges that remain. America's aviation system is under stress, demonstrated by the number of near misses and close calls. We need to hear today about a plan on how to tackle these safety issues across our skies.

The FAA's workforce has changed and will continue to do so over the next several years. We look forward to hearing about how you will build a strong safety culture, attract new talent, and renew leadership at the FAA.

And like its workforce, FAA safety systems and technology must also be upgraded to keep pace with 21st century innovations. If confirmed, you will have the opportunity to lead NAS modernization into the next era. And telling us exactly how to get that done. To be the world's leader in aviation, the United States must be a strong voice for safety at the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). You have over 30 years of experience in aviation, including executive roles on these important international issues. We hope that your leadership will help the world community continue its safety focus. We need to learn how the FAA will effectively raise the global safety bar on pilot training and human factors.

The families of the 737 MAX tragedies were critical in helping Congress pass important legislation, the Aircraft Certification, Safety and Accountability Act. They support your nomination as I mentioned. We expect an understanding this morning on how you're going to carry out the implementation of these critical safety reforms.

The American public deserves a safe, reliable and effective air transportation system. Our economy depends on it. If confirmed, you will have the opportunity not only to lead the FAA, but shape America's future of aviation, along with NASA.

These are challenging times. But the aviation community and the leadership across many spectrums have the ability to get this job done and get it done correctly.

So, I welcome and thank you for your willingness to serve, and take that leadership role in helping us.

Question and Answer 1

VIDEO

Cantwell: Mr. Whitaker, I so appreciate you and your willingness to serve and your many years of experience.

You mentioned your commitment to implementing the safety certification program, which some of it has been implemented. But there's more to do. And I guess I would just say as a summation, that the world of aviation since you've left the FAA has changed significantly. You mentioned the 737 max crashes, the COVID pandemic, how we kept airlines moving during that time period. Recently, the NOTAM system outages, near misses, things of that nature. What the FAA needs to do, I think, are even greater challenges since when you were there before. So I appreciate you saying that you wanted to fully implement the laws. So thank you. Thank you for that.

What are your strategies for building a resilient safety culture at the FAA? And what do you think it takes at this point in time to have that safety culture?

I just want to mention, we were able to implement the Samya Stumo Air Grant Program and I see it already paying dividends on Capitol Hill and at agencies because we have the smartest technology people here helping on the very technical details of aviation. The underlying ACSAA bill has the integrated project team, sometimes around here we call them the gray beards. While I'm anxious to see how the gray beards assess technology, as you mentioned in your statement, that may not be disclosed by a manufacturer. And yet, you have to understand the huge technology change that is happening.

I mean, I wonder at some time we shouldn't be looking at a CTO. In some ways, NASA is our CTO, but maybe on the implementation of things, as we look at the NOTAM outage and other things. I mean, maybe in addition to the forward thinking that NASA does for the agency, maybe a CTO, or these integrated project team leaders are a key to our future.

But if you could talk about what it is that you think we need to build in that intersection of changes of technology and safety.

Whitaker: Thank you, Senator Cantwell. It's a great question. I think there are a number of aspects to this, we need to build a strong leadership team, make sure we have the right people in the right positions, and make sure they're permanent. And we need a strong bench. So I think focusing on making sure we have the expertise in the organization is going to be key.

Safety culture doesn't create itself. And I think you have to constantly emphasize that it is our first mission, above all else, and everything has to be focused on that. We have to hold the line on pressure to reduce standards and make sure we're keeping the system as safe as possible.

The technology issue is a very interesting one. There are a lot of new technologies coming into the agency that you can't prove out through flight testing necessarily. Software is a good example of that. New technologies that interact with each other in ways that maybe we haven't experienced in the past. So I think it is good to look at having somebody with the appropriate technology experience, who can see the big picture when a new aircraft with new technology comes in, how the pieces fit together, and where we can look for risks that may not be apparent otherwise.

Cantwell: So you're fully committed to the integrated project team and getting them on board and their oversight in the certification process?

Whitaker: I think further integration in the certification process between groups, including technology is a key reform from ACSAA and we will certainly implement that and look for ways to even go beyond that.

Cantwell: What else do we need to do here on Capitol Hill? You mentioned a bench. I would just call it a resilient workforce. How do we communicate to people what the workforce needs of the FAA are so that we can build this? I think it's one of your key priorities. You mentioned it in your statement. But we, like every other workforce in the nation, we need the right people and we need them now. So what can we do to better enable this FAA workforce?

Whitaker: I think assessing the workforce will be one of the first goals that I have within the agency and I would look forward to finding ways that we can increase ways to bring people into the agency. I think it's a tight workforce right now in aerospace, and we recruit in the same places that private industry does, and we've got to figure out a way to be competitive to bring the right talent into the agency.

Cantwell: Will you work with us on the ability of the FAA to communicate these outcomes? I think we get in this role between the legislative branch in the agency, and we've had to push for a lot of discussions so that people understand impacts. And so I hope you will commit to being a frequent communicator. I think my former colleague,

Senator Wicker, had his levels of frustration many times before the Committee in cooperation with the FAA on information. And what we need is worthy authorizers, but we're not the appropriators. And what needs to be clear to the appropriators is what a shortfall and impact at the FAA will mean for us to do any aspect of the job at the FAA. So if you'll commit to that?

Whitaker: I will. I think communicating better with stakeholders all around will be an important priority as well.

Cantwell: Thank you.

Question and Answer 2

VIDEO

Cantwell: One thing we didn't cover...you're kind of "Mr. NextGen." Could you explain where you think we are? What's been implemented? What advantages that's given us? And what more advantages will it give us in aviation, if we get that fully implemented under your watch?

Whitaker: Thank you, Senator. Next Gen is an often a misunderstood designation. It is a collection of programs to upgrade the National Airspace. We use the analogy of building an iPad. So we've put in an entirely new technology platform that allows us to now move traffic using satellite technology, rather than radar. And to communicate with data, rather than voice communications for routing. So it's a significant upgrade of the system.

The early foundational investments allow us to continue to add new efficiencies into that system. New technologies to make it easier to control traffic. It was originally designed as a 2010 to 2025 program, so 15 years. And it's largely completed. Some of the programs will run beyond that. So Data Comm for example, largely because it was expanded, it was such a popular technology that we've expanded it to additional facilities. So I think it's largely coming to a close and it's time to really look at what's next for the aerospace.

Cantwell: So you would say in general, to somebody at home who may not quite understand this, we've moved off of radar and are on to satellite communications.

Whitaker: We have moved from radar to satellite, yes.

Cantwell: And guiding planes in a much more gradual approach, saving fuel and cost.

Whitaker: That's right. I think many of us remember the step down approaches where you would feel a descent and level, and a descent and level. And now it's a much more efficient descent, where you pull back the power and let the aircraft take its natural path down to the runway, much more fuel efficient and much quieter.

Cantwell: And what do you think that benefited aviation? How do you think that's benefited aviation?

Whitaker: I think fuel savings is a huge component of that, noise reduction, and block time savings for airlines. So, it was a big upfront investment, but it's yielding benefits and will continue to yield benefits.

Cantwell: Well, I think I wanted to close with that just because I think you were at the beginning of a very big transformation. And yet, we have more transformation to do. So I think you're the guy with the experience of that NextGen implementation that gives you the depth and breadth of how big a challenge can be. Because certainly it was a big challenge, moving our country onto a better system. So we'll look forward to that full implementation. Because I agree with you, I think it could yield much bigger aviation advantages to the United States. If we keep moving forward on this.

I think you can see we had a very engaged Committee today. I think you can see that this Committee cares a lot about aviation. We had I think a few people missing probably because they're dealing with other big thorny problems at the moment, but nearly perfect attendance from everybody and very big engagement. I think I heard the words safety and workforce constantly from everyone. So I think it tells you what we think the priorities are. So again, thank you for your willingness to serve.