

Congressman Randy Feenstra (IA-4)
House Armed Services NDAA Member Day Written Testimony
May 20, 2025

Thank you, Chairman Rogers, for allowing me to testify before the Armed Services Committee.

I appreciate your work on behalf of our troops and your commitment to strengthening our national security.

Established in 1946, the 185th Air Refueling Wing of the Iowa Air National Guard has been instrumental to the security of our nation, is an immense source of pride for the Siouxland Tri-State region and has a long history of winning military honors.

For much of that time, the 185th, then known as the 185th Fighter Wing, was home to hundreds of brave servicemembers flying aircraft including the P-51 Mustang, the A-7 Corsair, and the F-16 Fighting Falcon. In 2003, the Air Force directed the unit conversion to their current mission, the KC-135 Stratotanker, and given their current designation as the 185th Air Refueling Wing.

In the past two decades, the Airmen at the 185th has served valiantly. The 185th refueling mission is critical to nuclear deterrence and vital to the Great Power Competition. They have supported missions across all Combatant Commands Areas of Responsibility, NATO, and domestic operations across the homeland.

Since the transition from fighters more than two decades ago, required heavy-aircraft infrastructure upgrades have not been met. Most notably, the runway has never been replaced to support the weight of the KC-135. The 185th runway was originally built for the 40,000-pound F-16 rather than the 322,000-pound Stratotanker. Short-term fixes were completed as recently as 2022 extending its FAA certification to 2027. **But its long-term viability remains uncertain.** The weight of the aircraft will continually degrade the runway beyond its operational limits.

The 185th has had to overcome numerous difficulties due to the lack of a runway replacement. Temporary repairs have been constant, shutting down the runway for months at a time. Even after these repairs and having to rely on more than 110 takeoff waivers, the 185th continues to experience severely degraded operational capabilities. The delays in infrastructure improvements also require the KC-135's deploying overseas to make additional refueling stops due to the reduced fuel load and takeoff weight limits on the current runway.

Despite these setbacks, the 185th has excelled when compared to its peers. They've been awarded the Air & Space Outstanding Unit Award 11 times in the past two decades. It's also received the Meritorious Unit Award and the Airlift/Tanker Association Outstanding Unit Award. Most recently the 185th Maintenance Group was recognized as the top performing organization in 2024 earning the Air National Guard's Maintenance Effectiveness Award.

In an effort to highlight the time sensitivity of this project, last month I had the opportunity to meet with the Acting Director of the Air National Guard, Major General Duke Pirak, alongside Adjutant General of the Iowa National Guard, Major General Stephen Osborn, and Deputy Adjutant General of the Iowa Air National Guard, Brigadier General Mark Muckey, to discuss the criticality of keeping the 185th operationally viable. I also have authored a letter to Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth and Major General Pirak requesting that the runway at the 185th be included in future plans, which was signed by the full Iowa delegation and members of Congress from South Dakota and Nebraska. My prior letter to then-Secretary Austin also had the same level of support.

The 185th has shown it more than deserves its runway replacement. For national security purposes, for our Air Force's success, and for the safety of our servicemen and women across the globe – what sense does it make to keep one-hand tied behind the back of one of our nation's finest Air National Guard Units?

If funding for full replacement of the runway cannot be secured, the 185th ARW faces a loss of the KC-135 Mission, cessation of Air National Guard flying activities at the Sioux City Airport, loss of the airport fire department, closure of the sole Air National Guard Fighter Aircraft Paint Facility, probable loss of the airport control tower, and ultimately the possibility of complete base closure. Not to mention the loss of nearly a 1,000-strong workforce tied to the base and its operations. That is why getting this runway replaced is an important priority.

With increased threats by both nuclear armed and conventional adversaries, continued success of the 185th mission is vital to National Security. That is why I am fighting for runway replacement funding. I look forward to working with you with the goal of getting this achieved.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Randy Feenstra', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Randy Feenstra
Member of Congress