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**Before the Subcommittee on Aviation**
**Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure**
**United States House of Representatives**

**"Counter-Unmanned Aircraft Systems"**
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Chairman Nehls, Ranking Member Cohen and members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me to this hearing.

My name is Chris McLaughlin, and I am the Executive Vice President of Operations at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport (DFW), the third busiest airport in the world. I look forward to sharing DFW's perspective on countering unmanned aircraft systems (UAS).

I am particularly grateful to testify in today's hearing because aviation and airport security has been a career-long passion of mine. Recently, I had the opportunity to serve on the FAA's UAS Detection and Mitigation Systems Aviation Rulemaking Committee (ARC), where I co-chaired a working group on operational requirements for UAS detection and mitigation systems.

The ARC's report highlighted that airports face unique challenges with drone threats due to the dynamic nature of airport environments. Unlike other critical infrastructure, airports must manage airspace in real-time and with high volumes of aircraft, ensuring drone operations don't disrupt essential commercial aviation and that counter-UAS efforts don't unintentionally jeopardize the same.

For example, at DFW, we handle over 80 million passengers annually and serve as a major hub for both domestic and international air travel. An unauthorized drone in close proximity to our, or any airport, can have catastrophic consequences, including collisions with aircraft, the disruption of operations and other safety risks to passengers and crews.

Last fall, this Committee built on the ARC recommendations and advanced the bipartisan Counter-UAS Authority Security, Safety, and Reauthorization Act (H.R. 8610), which would have provided a broad framework to reauthorize and expand the use of Counter-UAS systems to protect airports and other critical infrastructure from nefarious and unauthorized drone threats throughout the National Airspace System (NAS). This bill was an important first step in advancing critical legislation to counter the growing threats from UAS.

To be clear though, DFW is not anti-drone. While unauthorized drone activity presents significant risk, authorized drones can serve as invaluable tools for airports by enhancing operational safety, efficiency, and innovation. Drones can act as a force multiplier in command-and-control situations, providing critical overwatch during major incidents or emergencies.

Drones are also crucial for coordination with explosive ordinance disposal (EOD) teams, enabling remote searches of suspicious bags or vehicles without exposing personnel to potential risks. On the airfield, drones can provide real-time updates on construction projects, wildlife detection and show promise in monitoring safety areas for changes in condition. Their thoughtful integration holds the potential to create a safe and secure environment, offering numerous benefits while addressing risks. This is why ensuring safety, while supporting UAS integration in an evolving airspace, is crucial.

At DFW, drone detection has served as a critical first step in addressing UAS presence. We have partnered with TSA on detection since 2017, have piloted a second system through an FAA-approved process and intend to install a permanent solution with FAA approval.

Our detection system has been effective, identifying more than 5,000 legitimate drone flights in our five-mile radius, annually. Of that, about 150 were operated inappropriately. Telling the difference can be difficult because airports lack independent access to FAA data that identify which drones have the appropriate airspace authorization to operate near our facilities and which do not. Better data sharing would enhance airport safety.

Moreover, DFW is one of the limited number of airports with detection systems in place. Most airports do not have the same level of situational awareness about drone operations in their airspace or near their airfield. This knowledge is crucial for safe, efficient operations and for determining when immediate mitigation efforts are needed.

But detection and information sharing will not be enough. In extreme situations, mitigation is important for airports and right now, that authority is limited to certain federal agencies whose physical presence at airports is insufficient.

Only four federal agencies have the authority to mitigate persistent UAS threats and that authority for two (the Departments of Homeland Security and Justice) has consistently been subject to short-term extensions. Currently, their authority is set to expire on March 14. Thus, we urge Congress to extend the authority for these federal agencies and expand it to provide airports, other critical infrastructure and state and local law enforcement agencies more opportunities to respond to drone threats.

State and local law enforcement agencies with advanced capabilities are better positioned physically to respond to drone incidents near airports. With proper authority, safety-tested technology, advanced training and strict federal oversight, they could supplement federal efforts, enhancing response times and improving coordination. Similar models for success exist today in aviation and have been effective for decades.

At DFW, for example, our Police Department has a close working relationship with our federal partners who provide training, guidance and oversight for our Canine (K9) Operations program and EOD teams. Their oversight and training are invaluable and our officers' ability to respond to incidents relieves what would otherwise be a heavy burden on federal resources.

The federal government should have the primary responsibility for monitoring the airspace surrounding an airport facility based on FAA's longstanding duty to ensure the safe, efficient and secure use of the national airspace. FAA has the authority and obligation to take initial actions to divert traffic in the event of an unauthorized drone operating near a flight path or other critical area. In addition, the agency possesses the data to determine which drones are authorized to operate at a given location.

When it comes to drones, the federal government is best positioned to lead the detection and mitigation effort. The FAA and TSA have coordinated on this issue for years and should continue to be responsible for the oversight and deployment of UAS detection and mitigation systems in the airport environment.

Willing airports can play a broader role and support the federal government's efforts through pilot programs that allow them to acquire and use UAS mitigation systems tailored to their unique circumstances. These programs should balance security needs with operational realities and allow airports to safely develop mitigation strategies.

DFW is committed to working with Congress and our federal partners to develop Counter-UAS strategies that meet the needs of all airports. Despite our individual decision, and as a final point, we strongly believe that the acquisition and deployment of any UAS detection and mitigation system should remain optional for airports, recognizing each one's variations in terms of size, traffic, financial resources and impact to the NAS.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am confident that with your leadership and the collaboration of all stakeholders, we can counter UAS threats while supporting the growth of the commercial drone industry.