

TESTIMONY OF
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Chairman Nehls, Ranking Member Carson, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. This is my first appearance before you as Administrator of the Federal Aviation Administration, and I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss the FAA's work to strengthen aviation safety, modernize our air traffic control system, and prepare the FAA for the challenges and opportunities ahead. It is a tremendous honor to serve in this role, and I remain committed to fulfilling its responsibilities to the best of my ability.

I want to start by acknowledging the tragic accident involving Flight 5342 at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (DCA) earlier this year. It remains at the forefront of my mind in the work that I do. It is a sobering reminder of why the FAA exists and was ultimately the reason why I accepted the call from President Trump and Secretary Duffy to take this job. Our mission is to ensure safety for pilots, flight attendants, crew and the traveling public, and we must always confront risks with urgency, transparency, and action. But to do that, we need to vigilantly and diligently identify potential risks in our National Airspace System.

As you know, immediately after the accident, the FAA changed operations in the National Capital Region—permanently restricting non-essential helicopter operations, closing certain helicopter routes, eliminating visual separation approaches, and requiring aircraft to broadcast ADS-B Out signals, with very limited exceptions. We also initiated our review of airport “hot spots” across the country where mixed traffic environments may create elevated risk. These assessments revealed operational patterns in several locations that needed attention, and we are diligently working to address them.

We continue to work closely with the National Transportation Safety Board on its ongoing investigations, including its investigation of the recent accident involving UPS Flight 2976. These tragedies underscore that safety requires constant vigilance and a willingness to examine our processes, assumptions, and historic certification structures. I appreciate this Committee's work to support us in addressing these matters.

At the same time, we continue to maintain our oversight of aerospace manufacturers, including Boeing, and how the company manages design, manufacturing, and quality across its programs. We also continue to keep a close watch on the production system itself. As a process-driven leader, I know that disciplined, well-designed processes consistently result in strong and predictable outcomes. I have confidence in our oversight of Boeing processes and in the FAA team leading this important work.

The recent shutdown demonstrated clearly how essential the FAA's safety mission is to the country. Aviation drives over five percent of our national economy, supports millions of jobs, and moves people and goods that keep communities and industries connected and functioning. The safe and efficient operation of the National Airspace System relies on a well-staffed, well-trained FAA workforce.

Our employees—air traffic controllers, safety inspectors, engineers, technicians, and many others—showed extraordinary dedication during the 43-day lapse in appropriations. Many worked without pay. Yet even under these circumstances, many continued to uphold the highest standards of professionalism and showed up to work.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that we entered the funding lapse already below the staffing levels needed for the reliable operation of our air traffic control facilities, intensifying the government shutdown's impact. And as the shutdown progressed, our operational monitoring tools signaled growing strain.

The FAA observes staffing triggers on a near daily basis throughout the year, responding with established procedures, such as reducing traffic when necessary, increasing miles-in-trail separation standards, implementing ground delay programs, or executing ground stops, as appropriate. During the shutdown, however, staffing triggers at key facilities spiked to unprecedented levels—jumping from single digits to a peak of over 80 in a single day on November 8. Those metrics are indicators of controller workload and system stress. Reflecting on lessons learned from the DCA accident we were proactive—closely monitoring trends, anticipating stress points, and preparing mitigation measures before conditions became acute. Accordingly, we temporarily reduced flight operations at 40 major airports.

As the situation unfolded, we were able to actively investigate emerging constraints, assess risks in near real time, and implement measures in an orderly manner to relieve some of the pressure on our controllers and maintain safe operations. The direct correlation between controller strain, system capacity, and risk reinforced that the FAA must act urgently and decisively when the data calls for it. It also underscored the importance of maintaining consistent, long-term funding for the agency.

Strengthening the workforce remains central to our path forward. Under Secretary Duffy's leadership, the FAA supercharged air traffic controller hiring. We met our FY25 hiring goal with 2,026 new controllers, and we are on track to hire at least 8,900 controllers through 2028. We

have increased training throughput by expanding the Enhanced Air Traffic -Collegiate Training Initiative program to 9 additional institutions. And on the safety oversight side, we have expanded hiring for inspectors and engineers using on-the-spot hiring authority, relocation incentives, and strategic placement in critical locations. Across all of these efforts, our focus remains on attracting, developing, and retaining the best and brightest talent.

As we look ahead, it is clear that the FAA must continue to innovate and evolve. The aviation ecosystem is changing rapidly—unmanned aircraft, advanced air mobility, more commercial space launches, and renewed interest in supersonic flight all demand a regulatory framework that can keep pace with innovation while maintaining the highest safety standards. President Trump’s recent executive orders reinforce the need for continued modernization and innovation across the agency.

Congress provided a strong foundation for this work through the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024, and we remain committed to its implementation. The Act directs us to improve regulatory agility, integrate new entrants more efficiently, and strengthen internal coordination. Our implementation of these reforms is informed, in part, by lessons learned from the DCA accident and the need for clearer accountability and streamlined processes.

In that same spirit, the FAA is implementing a single, agency-wide Safety Management System (SMS). This unified approach will help the FAA detect, analyze, and mitigate risk more consistently and ensure that lessons from accidents, incidents, and near misses are acted upon quickly and across the agency.

The National Airspace System itself must also be renewed. The existing systems—radar, communications networks, software systems—are decades old. President Trump presented a bold vision for a brand-new air traffic control system within the next three years and our work to do that is already underway. Our controllers deserve a system they can rely on and that matches the complexity of today’s airspace and the future of the National Airspace System.

We have selected an Integrator who will oversee this transformational work. At the same time, we are making advancements in our modernization efforts. We have taken the FAA’s 15-year radar modernization roadmap and compressed it into a three-year timeline, establishing an accelerated implementation cadence that is already in motion. We have transitioned over one-third of our copper wire to fiber, and have begun modernizing radios, upgrading voice switches, and improving digital communications, among other critical improvements. These improvements will enable the Integrator to hit the ground running to create a more reliable, resilient infrastructure and serve as the foundation for the future National Airspace System.

The One Big Beautiful Bill provides a historic \$12.5 billion down payment to support this modernization effort. That funding will help us move faster and smarter, while also strengthening core infrastructure, and deliver on President Trump’s bold vision for the future of American aviation. But the work ahead remains significant. Success will require continued collaboration—

across the FAA, with our aviation partners, and with Congress. With this accelerated modernization work already underway, that collaboration becomes even more essential.

The DCA accident was a defining moment for the FAA and for the country. It exposed gaps, but it also galvanized action. The recent shutdown further reminded us of the importance of our aviation ecosystem. And together, these events have shaped an agency now more focused, more proactive, and more determined than ever to fulfill its mission.

We owe the American people a system that is safe, modern, resilient, and built for the future. That is the course we are on, and with the support of this Committee, we will deliver it.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions.