COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY
REPUBLICANS Frank Lucas, Ranking Member

Opening Statement of Ranking Member Brian Babin

"Examining R&D Pathways to Sustainable Aviation"

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If I had to hazard a guess, most of our constituents fly budget airlines, not business class, and certainly not private aviation. Roughly a third of the cost of a flight comes from fuel, and nearly half for budget airlines. The less fuel you burn, the less emissions you produce. Passengers want cheaper tickets, and we all want less emissions. Both lead to the same free-market forces that drive airlines to purchase efficient aircraft.

This incentivizes aircraft manufacturers to produce more efficient aircraft and engines with little government intrusion into the market. Flights today are 50 percent more efficient than they were in 1990, and each new generation of aircraft is 10-25 percent more efficient than the last. Separately, our nation's airline industry already committed to carbon neutral growth by 2030, and Boeing pledged to deliver aircraft capable of flying on 100 percent biofuels by 2030 on their own.

This isn't to say that there's not a role for the government to play in advancing aviation sustainability. The FAA conducts research to certify new technologies are safe and NASA develops high-risk, high-reward technologies, that the private sector is unwilling or unable to undertake.

But we should be mindful of government intrusion into the market. The US and Europe are embroiled in a nearly decade-long dispute over government aircraft subsidies. Just last fall the World Trade Organization allowed Europe to implement over $4 billion in tariffs on US products as a disagreement over FAA and NASA research and development grants. This followed a 2019 ruling by the WTO that allowed the US to impose $7.5 billion in tariffs on Europe over EU loans to Airbus. Earlier this month those tariffs were put on hold for a few months pending additional negotiations. As we look towards supporting our nation's aviation sector, we should maintain the principles that made us the world leader in aviation – free enterprise and free markets.

Another thing we must consider is the impact on safety, which should be everyone's highest priority. Environmental R&D within FAA's RE&D account increased over 190 percent from 2008 to 2021. Over that same time the budget for safety research decreased.

Unfortunately, we may be seeing the results of these policy decisions. In order to compete with the new Airbus A320neo, Boeing designed the 737 Max to be more fuel efficient and produce less emissions. The existing 737 airframe was modified by adding larger, more efficient engines. Because of the larger size, the engines had to be moved forward and higher on the airframe to maintain ground clearance. Doing so altered the aircraft's aerodynamics and required a new Maneuvering Characteristic Augmentation System, or MCAS. MCAS caused the aircraft to pitch downwards in certain configurations and was featured prominently in the NTSB's Safety Recommendation Reports. Similarly, the Wall Street Journal published an article last Friday highlighting a recent incident involving an engine breaking apart over Denver. The article noted several other incidents of engine failures and engine cover damage over the last five years, one of which led to the first U.S. airline passenger fatality in nearly a decade.

I am not saying these accidents were caused by efforts to green aviation, but we should be reminded of Hoover Institute economist Dr. Thomas Sowell, who said "there are no solutions, only trade-offs." As we discuss the benefits of sustainable aviation today, we should also discuss its costs, either at the potential expense of safety or to other areas of our economy. Upending existing infrastructure, promoting land-use change and monocrops, raising commodity and food prices, increasing transportation costs, increasing taxes, and the impact of diluting the value of retirees' savings to pay for all of it should all be reviewed critically.

Green aviation not only requires a whole of government approach, it requires a whole of society approach. Luckily, the United States is the leader in aviation and science. Our industry and research communities are second-to-none. With FAA, NASA, DOE, and other agencies providing fundamental basic research, and industry leveraging market-based incentives, I am sure we meet any challenge presented to us.