

The Honorable Glenn “GT” Thompson (PA-15)
Testimony before the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Member Day Hearing on Priorities in the 118th Congress
April 18, 2023

Chairman Graves, Ranking Member Larsen, and Members of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure:

Good morning and thank you for providing the opportunity to share my priorities for the 118th Congress. Representing one of the most rural districts east of the Mississippi River, access to quality infrastructure and reliable transit is critical to farmers, small businesses, manufacturers, and others throughout my district. In order to improve and maintain the infrastructure of the United States, it is crucial we support programs that promote new, innovative technologies that advance all aspects of our country’s transportation needs.

Essential Air Service

The Airline Deregulation Act of 1978 made airlines the sole authority to determine which domestic markets would receive air service as well as what airfares passengers would be charged. Subsequently, the Essential Air Service (EAS) Program was established to ensure taxpayers in small, rural communities had continued connectivity to the entire National Transportation System by subsidizing commuter and certified air carriers.

This program is critical in rural America and has provided links to hub airports at over 175 locations throughout the United States and its territories that would otherwise lack commercial air service. With rural airports located in my congressional district, including two (2) airports that participate in the EAS program, I see first-hand the importance of maintaining this program for all Americans who live in underserved, rural areas.

Additionally, given the success of the program in connecting rural communities to the rest of the world and the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic on these rural airports in particular, I support reexamining eligibility requirements for EAS in the 2023 FAA Reauthorization before your Committee this year. Some airports, through no fault of their own, were unable to maintain the necessary passenger counts in order to sustain EAS service during the pandemic.

While it is important to fully examine the impacts of reopening the program, our nation’s rural and small communities depend on commercial air service for transportation, medical supplies, commercial goods, and access to larger business markets. By continuing or expanding regular air service to these areas, Americans will continue to access necessary medical services that might only be available in larger cities, as well as increasing the economic opportunities and visitors to these communities. I urge the Committee to fully reauthorize and carefully consider an expansion of the Essential Air Service Program as part of the FAA Reauthorization.

Bus Testing Facility Program

As part of authorization of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU), the Bus Testing Facility Program at the Pennsylvania State University, operated by the Thomas D. Larson Pennsylvania Transportation Institute, tests new transit bus models for safety, structural integrity and durability, reliability, performance, maintainability, noise, and fuel economy.

The program tests new bus models before they are purchased by transit agencies. This often helps address problems before the fleet is built, potentially saving considerable money and time, while avoiding inconveniencing passengers.

Since the beginning of this program, more than 530 new bus models have been tested, resulting in over 10,300 documented design failures. In 2022 alone, the bus testing facility identified 174 deficiencies, including 27 structural, 21 road calls, and four severe safety related failures. By identifying these failures early in the production process, the program averted many fleet failures, saving millions of dollars in maintenance costs, litigation, and lost revenue.

I request the Committee take a close look at this program that has a proven record of high-quality success and reporting. Without this program, manufacturers will not be able to sell new buses, transit agencies will not be able to acquire new buses, and consumers will be left with fewer options for transportation. Continuing to invest in initiatives like the Bus Testing Facility Program ensures a safer, more reliable future for mass transit throughout the country.

Workforce Development in Infrastructure

Rebuilding our nation's infrastructure will require more than just bridges, roads, and waterways; it will require the development of a skilled workforce that can design, build, and maintain that infrastructure. On July 19, 2022, during a House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee hearing on the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg testified, "we really need... to engage all of the players who have an opportunity to participate in the workforce of the future."

As Co-Chair of the bipartisan House Career and Technical Education (CTE) Caucus, I recognize the importance and value CTE programs offer to individuals, especially those in infrastructure sectors, and it is important that they have a seat at the table. CTE programs and apprenticeships are proven strategies that can provide individuals with the education and work-based learning needed for career success in these high-skill, high wage industry sectors and occupations.

Congress recognized CTE as an effective workforce development strategy when it unanimously passed the Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act reauthorizing the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act in the 115th Congress. We must continue this momentum by including workforce investments alongside infrastructure spending.

While I was pleased to see substantial acknowledgement of the importance of workforce development programs within the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act and support for pre-apprenticeship and apprenticeship programs, I remain concerned that CTE programs, and therefore thousands of high-skilled workers, were largely left out of these discussions.

Therefore, I respectfully request that you include the following in any supplemental infrastructure legislation:

- A stipulation that states devote a portion of the infrastructure funds they receive to workforce development programs, including CTE programs, with the flexibility to invest in such programs they deem appropriate for local infrastructure needs, and that they coordinate such investments with the agencies that receive the states' funds from the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act and Carl D. Perkins CTE Act so as not to duplicate efforts;
- Dedicated resources for updating the facilities and equipment used in CTE programs of study in infrastructure sectors to ensure they are aligned with fast-paced, ever-changing industry expectations and standards.

Additionally, as part of this year's FAA Reauthorization, I encourage the Committee to consider expanding workforce development provisions for careers in the aviation industry. As we all know, a pilot shortage is plaguing commercial air travel operations throughout the country. These impacts have been particularly pronounced in rural communities, like the ones I represent, who have had several airlines discontinue service not because of low passenger counts or depressed interest, but because they simply do not have enough pilots to fly the planes.

By continuing to invest in and expand successful programs, such as those authorized in Section 625 of the last FAA Reauthorization, we can ensure staffing needs can meet consumer demand for air travel, increasingly complex new aircraft in the global fleet, and the current aviation workforce reaching retirement age.

WOTUS

Unfortunately, despite repeated bipartisan opposition and formal disapproval by the House and Senate, President Biden continues to push forward a final Waters of the United States, or WOTUS, rule, the third different proposal in the last decade, that continues the Administration's attack on America's farmers, ranchers, and producers. As the Chairman and former Ranking Member of the House Agriculture Committee, I have spent the last two years traveling to more than 40 states to hear directly from producers about the challenges they face. These include burdensome regulations, record inflation, snarled supply chains, and now an egregious government land grab. This will plunge our rural communities into ambiguity and threatens our nation's food security, which is national security.

The Administration's final rule has nothing to do with clean water and everything to do with the Environmental Protection Agency's addiction to power. Simply recognizing long-standing agricultural exemptions that have been too narrowly applied for decades does not make up for,

once again, silencing the voices of American agriculture. America's farmers, ranchers, and landowners deserve a WOTUS definition that is fair to agriculture, maintains the historical reach of the Clean Water Act, and provides consistency and clarity, none of which is achieved by the Administration's rule. It is beyond time policymakers here in Washington listen to the American farmers and ranchers who provide food and fiber for our nation and the world.

Fire Retardant

Fire retardant is a critical tool that the Forest Service and other firefighting agencies utilize when fighting wildfire, and it is typically distributed by airtankers. Fire retardant is not used for extinguishing wildfire but rather to decrease the intensity of fire and slow its advance. Since the 1950s, it has been an essential tool to help suppress and control disastrous wildfires, save homes and communities, and protect firefighters and residents during these catastrophes.

The Federal Water Pollution Control Act, commonly known as the Clean Water Act (CWA), is the central law governing pollution of the nation's surface waters. The CWA usually requires a National Pollution Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permit for a pollutant into a "water of the US" from a point source. According to recent Forest Service testimony, the agency's position has been that this permit was not required for fire control activities based upon guidance received from EPA in 2003. The agency is prohibited from releasing retardant directly into water bodies, except in cases of extreme life-threatening situations, and the Forest Service estimates that less than 1% of retardant drops had any impact on waterways. While there currently is no NPDES permit for the aerial application of fire retardant, the Forest Service is working with EPA on a general permit for its continued use.

Until that time, it is critical that the Forest Service continues its use of retardants. The Forest Service has stated that if the agency is only permitted to use water from airtankers, their ability to suppress fires would be significantly impacted. Requiring new permitting for fire retardant directly undermines the Forest Service's ability to slow the spread of wildfire and keep firefighters and residents safe during these catastrophes.

Thank you to Chairman Graves, Ranking Member Larsen, and Members of this Committee for allowing me to express my priorities for this Committee in the 118th Congress. I appreciate your consideration and look forward to working together on these and other issues.