

Secretary Ray LaHood
--Remarks as Prepared--
Regional Airline Association Annual Convention
Nashville, Tennessee
Tuesday, May 17, 2011

Thank you, Roger, for that great introduction and, more importantly, for your outstanding service to the aviation industry and the American economy.

As some of you know, President Obama has designated this week as National Transportation Week. I'm proud to join in offering thanks to all the Americans who keep our people and economy moving, especially our regional air carriers.

I'm also proud to be the very first transportation secretary ever to visit the RAA's Annual Convention. My message for you this afternoon is simple: As long as I'm Secretary of Transportation, you will have a seat at the table when we make aviation policy.

With 13,000 regional flights a day, you're connecting people with places, and opportunities, they couldn't otherwise reach. 75 percent of United States communities with airline service rely on you and your 60,000 dedicated professionals. Each of you does much more than move passengers from hub to destination. You keep our economy in motion. You carry us, boldly, into the future. And that's why we're grateful not just for your hard work, but also for your leadership and advocacy. I want you to know: You have full partners in the Obama Administration and at the Department of Transportation.

Now, given that you account for more than half of our nation's commercial flights, I don't need to tell you how important you are to the industry's continued success. And there are, of course, a variety of ways to measure that success – the number of seats you fill, or the rate with which you depart on time, or the profits you earn. But the one that's most important to me, by far, is safety.

The success of the aviation industry hinges on the confidence of the American people that they will fly from origin to destination as safely as possible. In this sense, all airlines – large and small – will succeed or struggle together.

As you know, America's skies have never been safer – and they're getting safer all the time. That's a credit to the technicians, pilots, air traffic controllers, and so many others, including many of you. But I didn't come down to Nashville to take a victory lap. I'm here to roll up my sleeves and share in the heavy lifting of building a better future for America's regional carriers.

This is an industry that's never had the luxury of sitting back and enjoying the view. We need to be constantly planning for tomorrow. And with experts predicting air travel to grow 50 percent during the next decade, we're facing the prospect of some serious headwinds if we don't prepare and build now.

As many of you know, last spring, we launched the Future of Aviation Advisory Committee. Our first priority was to make this group a cross-section of the industry. That's why we made sure regional airlines were well-represented.

I'm pleased to report that the committee provided 23 consensus recommendations. I'm sure you've heard that we're reviewing and working through how best to implement them. But I want you to hear directly from me that the FAAC report will not sit on a shelf collecting dust. I've appointed a senior DOT staff member to oversee implementation. Elements of the FAAC report will play a major role in the industry's future. And I can promise that you'll hear more about this in the months ahead.

Another thing we know will be part of the industry's future is NextGen. In some ways, the cars we drive are more technologically advanced than our airplanes. But by retrofitting aircraft and air traffic control centers with ADS-B, advanced communications systems, real-time weather reports, and other technologies, NextGen will cut travel times, reduce congestion, and alleviate delays. We've been testing ADS-B capability in air space across the country, and we're seeing consistently improved taxi times.

But let me circle back to a few other efforts directed at making our skies as safe as possible. Just last week, the department proposed a new requirement for pilot and crew training, which would ensure, for the first time ever, that pilots refine their skills in real world scenarios – the kind of unexpected situations where instincts and experience are critical. Like the Future of Aviation Advisory Committee, this final rule has been the product of significant collaboration. After initially proposing it in January of 2009, we sought input from the industry. We've made major changes based on what we heard.

Now, I can't talk about safety without giving credit where credit is due. So I want to express my appreciation to the RAA and its members for being a willing and enthusiastic partner with the DOT and FAA. You've developed your own Strategic Safety Initiative. You're conducting an ongoing study of fatigue in multi-segment operations. Virtually all of you have adopted voluntary "gold standard" safety programs. We're grateful. We look forward to working with you on similar efforts.

Let me close by saying this: During the past two and a half years, DOT has partnered time and again with the RAA and its members. You've responded by embracing the opportunity to join us in moving the industry forward. Yes, you operate in a tough, competitive marketplace. Yes, you face challenges from tight margins to high fuel prices.

But there was a reason America was first to flight. There's a reason we lead what Wilbur Wright called "the infinite highway of the air." Americans build. We innovate. We transform challenges into opportunities. That's exactly what you're doing, day after day. On behalf of President Obama, I offer sincere thanks.

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