

U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

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February 4, 2008

David M. Walker
Comptroller General
Government Accountability Office
441 G Street., N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20548

Dear Mr. Walker,

In 1997, as a result of recommendations from the White House Commission on Aviation Safety and Security¹ the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) initiated a program to track aviation safety trends quantitatively; monitor the effects of technological and procedural changes to the National Aviation System and contribute to the development of a quantitative, data-driven basis for safety decisions.² Most of the previous safety-related data bases were based on self-reports and therefore not statistically reliable to determine trends or the effects of changes to the aviation safety system. NASA was selected to initiate this effort because of its success in operating the self-reporting Aviation Safety Reporting System.

The program, known as the National Aviation Operational Monitoring Service (NAOMS) began in 1998. It was designed to collect information about "precursor" safety events from pilots, controllers, mechanics and flight cabin crews. An outside team of experts was assembled to design the survey methodology and collect the data. By the end of 2003, the NAOMS project had collected a large amount of data from over 24,000 pilots. However, there was no funding to expand the project to controllers, mechanics or cabin crews, and the project was truncated at that point with the NASA in-house project team attempting – with a minimal budget – to do analysis on the collected data.

This project came to the Committee's attention when NASA refused to provide the raw data in response to a request under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), stating that "[r]elease of the requested data, which are sensitive and safety-related, could materially affect the public confidence in, and the commercial welfare of, the air carriers and the general aviation

¹ "White House Commission on Aviation Safety and Security: Final Report to President Clinton," February 12, 1997, Recommendation 1.8.

² Statler, I.C., Morrison, R. and Rosenthal, L.J., "Beyond Error Reporting Toward Risk Assessment," in *Proceedings of the 12th International Symposium on Aviation Psychology, 2003*

companies whose pilots participated in the study.”³ The Committee held a hearing on this issue on October 30, 2007, at which time Chairman Gordon asked for, and received, a commitment from NASA Administrator Michael Griffin that the data would be released by the end of the year. At that hearing, and in subsequent public statements, NASA and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) officials have provided negative evaluations of the project and the data itself, even though neither agency has made any attempt to analyze it. FAA officials have characterized the pilot responses as “hanger talk,” and Administrator Griffin said that the data doesn’t raise any doubt in his mind about the safety of the aviation system.⁴

On December 31, 2007, NASA released a redacted set of data. Administrator Griffin said the redactions were done to protect the identity of the pilots. However, the redaction team was told specifically that its scope of work did not include “Quantification of identification risk.”⁵ Nonetheless, it made the comment that the “probability of identifying respondents from unredacted NAOMS data is relatively small,” that there were numerous factors that limited any motivation to attempt to identify the pilots, and that “the utility of a redacted data set generally decreases as the certainty that a respondent cannot be identified by inference increases.”⁶ Not surprisingly, an expert statistician who has looked at the redacted set of data has told Committee staff that it is almost worthless for analysis in its present form.

NASA officials have repeatedly said that they have no intention of validating or analyzing the data collected.⁷ Therefore, we request that the Government Accountability Office (GAO), which employs experts in survey methodology, statistical analysis, and aviation policy, use the unredacted set of data collected by the NAOMS project and promptly provide the Committee with an appropriate analysis of this data and verification of the survey methodology. For example, we believe that rates of event occurrence can be calculated based on the information contained in sections A and B of the unredacted data. Such calculations could provide insight into the accuracy of FAA data reporting systems, the accuracy of the NAOMS survey itself and may point to important safety issues that would require further study. The Committee is mindful of GAO’s excellent record for retaining records on a confidential basis. The original data sets, which we can provide to GAO, may contain information that has some small possibility of compromising the identity of participating pilots, so we want to emphasize the importance of GAO treating the data as confidential.

³ Letter dated Sept. 5, 2007, from Thomas S. Luedtke, NASA associate administrator for institutions and management, to Adam Rappaport, Levin, Sullivan, Koch & Schulz.

⁴ Transcript of NASA media briefing, Dec. 31, 2007, pp. 18 and 21

⁵ Battelle Institute, “Proposed Approach to Redacting NAOMS Survey Data,” Nov. 20, 2007, p. 6.

⁶ *Supra*, pp. 14-15 and 18.

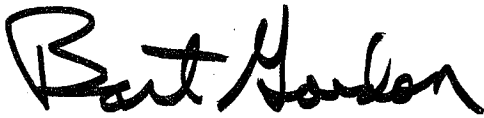
⁷ See, e.g., Dec. 31, 2007 transcript, pp. 28-29.

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This matter is a very high priority for the Committee and the flying public. We respectfully request that you make your analysis of the data a very high priority. Please have your staff contact Dan Pearson, Investigations and Oversight Subcommittee staff director, at (202) 225-4494, or Richard Obermann, Space and Aeronautics Subcommittee staff director, at (202) 225-7858 to coordinate this review.

Your assistance in this matter is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,



BART GORDON
Chairman



DANIEL LIPINSKI
Vice Chairman



MARK UDALL
Chairman
Subcommittee on Space
& Aeronautics



BRAD MILLER
Chairman
Subcommittee on Investigations
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JERRY COSTELLO
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Cc: The Honorable Ralph Hall
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The Honorable Tom Feeney
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