

HEARING CHARTER

Aviation Safety: Can NASA Do More to Protect the Public?

Wednesday, October 31st 2007
1:30 p.m. – 3:30 p.m.
2318 Rayburn House Office Building

Purpose

The Committee will hold a hearing on NASA policy regarding the agency's management of the National Aviation Operations Monitoring Service (NAOMS). NAOMS has been in the press due to NASA's refusal to release the data to an Associated Press (AP) reporter, offering the rationale that release of the information might undermine the flying public's confidence in the aviation system because it relates to safety. NASA's refusal to release this data has been widely condemned in the nation's press with editorials in many papers. NASA's Administrator Michael Griffin has formally distanced himself from that rationale, but he has not yet made it clear when or even whether NASA will publicly release this data.

Witnesses

Panel 1

Dr. Michael Griffin, Administrator, National Aeronautics and Space Administration

Mr. Jim Hall, Managing Partner, Hall and Associates LLC, and Former Chairman, National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB)

Panel 2

Mr. Robert S. Dodd, Safety Consultant and President, Dodd & Associates LLC

Dr. Jon A. Krosnick, Frederic O. Glover Professor in Humanities and Social Sciences, Stanford University

Captain Terry McVenes, Executive Air Safety Chairman, Air Line Pilots Association

Background

On October 29, Administrator Griffin sent a letter to the Committee indicating that the data was being provided to the Committee, but noting that "NASA believes that the data contains both confidential commercial data and information that could compromise anonymity that should be redacted prior to public release." Staff have been unable to find a NASA or Battelle staffer [the contractor on the project] who can articulate what commercially sensitive information resides in these data bases. As to anonymity, Battelle indicated that all personal identifying information was stripped away from the data within 24 hours of conducting a survey. It is unclear what data should be removed prior to public release and this may be a question for NASA.

The concern NASA has expressed in its initial FOIA rejection letter was that public release of the data may undermine confidence in flying among the public. However, other data safety systems are already open to the public and include plenty of details that could have far more impact on public confidence than data contained in a spreadsheet. The best known is the Aviation Safety Reporting System (ASRS) which includes numerous stories about near misses in the air and on the ground. The bottom line is that when planes have actually crashed, people keep going right to the airport. The Committee asked NASA to provide all records of the aviation industry expressing concerns that their commercial interests could be damaged or objecting to the impact on the flying public's attitudes if NAOMS data were made publicly available, and NASA could find no responsive records.

In addition to the FOIA issue, the hearing will provide an opportunity for the Committee to learn about aviation safety data sources and the rationale behind launching NAOMS in the first place. All other data systems involve voluntary self-reporting tied to either incidents that have happened or else data that has been filtered by private parties to strip information out of the report prior to being turned over to the government. FAA collects most of these data sources; NASA manages the Aviation Safety Reporting System (ASRS) for FAA. If it had been rolled out operationally, NAOMS would have integrated continuous survey data from pilots, ground controllers, ground crews, and cabin crews to create a complete picture of what is happening in the air safety system nationally. This information would not be driven by adverse events and would have a statistical rigor that the self-reporting anecdotal systems lack. As a result, safety experts could mine the NAOMS data for insights into new safety threats as they emerge.

The aviation system is changing due to new information and communications technologies that are being introduced into the system. It is also anticipated that the national airspace system will have to handle up to three times as much demand by 2025 compared to 2000. The voluntary reporting systems of the past may not be good enough, and certainly do not represent what could be achieved with improved data systems, to keep the skies over the United States safe. NAOMS was to be that pro-active, forward looking tool to identify problems tied to increasing demands on capacity and unexpected problems with the introduction of new technologies.

NASA spent three years developing and field testing the NAOMS survey with support by Battelle and several distinguished subcontractors who were experts in survey methodology or aviation safety. Then NASA ran a survey of commercial pilots for almost four years. Over 24,000 pilots responded to the survey. Another 4000 general aviation pilots were surveyed during a span of several months over 2002-2003. The contractor also began work to roll out a survey of air traffic controllers, but it was never implemented in the field. After spending more than \$8 million to develop this tool and begin to put it in place, NASA shut it down before it became operational. The project enjoyed unusual success in gathering responses from pilots, but the project also ran up against competing priorities within the agency, as well as a lack of interest at the FAA.

In shutting the project down, NASA has done absolutely nothing to either advertise the methodology and the goal they hoped to achieve or release any analytical products that give insights into air safety trends. This was true until the AP reporter pushed to get the materials out. Only then did the top managers for this project at NASA begin to try to put some sort of report together. NASA says a technical report will be released by the end of the year, but prior to a week ago, the report was described by both NASA counsel and NASA researchers to Committee staff as something that would represent analytical insights drawn from the data with recommendations for improving air safety. It appears that NASA has moved the goal posts even on this belated work product.

The reasons that NAOMS was needed have not changed. The national air transportation system appears safe at the moment, but new technologies and stresses will produce exactly the situation that NAOMS was designed to help address.

To help the Committee sort through some of this, we will receive testimony from **Dr. Michael Griffin**, the NASA administrator. The Committee will also take testimony from **Mr. Jim Hall** (former head of the National Transportation Safety Board and member of the 1997 Aviation Safety and Security Commission--the Gore Commission), **Dr. Robert Dodd** (aviation safety expert who managed the NAOMS project under contract to Battelle), **Dr. Jon Krosnik** (Stanford statistics professor who helped design the survey), and a representative of the Airline Pilots Association (ALPA), **Captain Terry McVenes**. ALPA actually opposes release of the raw data, but they do favor analysis of that information. NASA has also "handed-off" the NAOMS methodology to ALPA (though it has been redesigned as a web-based, not phone-based survey) so that they can administer the survey to their members. However, ALPA has told Committee staff that they have not decided what questions they would ask, who they would ask them of, or even when to run a survey. They have done nothing with NAOMS to date.