



**Congressman Ric Keller's Opening Statement for Judiciary Crime Subcommittee Hearing of H.R. 1615, Securing Airplane Cockpits from Lasers Act of 2007**

**May 1, 2007**

Aiming a laser beam into the cockpit of an airplane is a clear and present danger to the safety of all those onboard the aircraft.

This legislation is simple and straightforward. It makes it illegal to knowingly aim a laser pointer at an aircraft. Those who intentionally engage in such misconduct, shall be fined or imprisoned not more than five years, or both, in the discretion of the judge.

This legislation was unanimously approved by all Democrats and Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee in the last Congress. It then was approved by the full House on a voice vote, and the Senate also approved the legislation by unanimous consent, after slightly amending the legislation to provide for limited exceptions by the Department of Defense and FAA.

The problems caused by laser beam pranksters are more widespread than one might think. According to the Congressional Research Service and the Federal Aviation Administration, there have been over 500 incidents reported since 1990 where pilots have been disoriented or temporarily blinded by laser exposure.

These easily available pen-sized laser pointers, like the one I purchased here for \$12 at the House of Representatives Office Supply Store, have enough power to cause vision problems in pilots from a distance of two miles.

It's only a matter of time before one of these laser beam pranksters ends up killing over 200 people in a commercial airline crash.

Surprisingly, there is currently no federal statute on the books making it illegal to shine a laser beam into an aircraft's cockpit, unless one attempts to use the Patriot Act to claim that the action was a "terrorist attack or other attack of violence against a mass transportation system."

So far, none of the more than 500 incidents involving flight crew exposure to lasers have been linked to terrorism. Rather, it's often a case of pranksters making stupid choices to put pilots and their passengers at risk of dying. It is imperative that we send a message to the public that flight security is a serious issue. These acts of mischief will not be tolerated.

I wanted to learn what it was like to be in an aircraft cockpit hit by a laser beam, so I spoke with Lieutenant Barry Smith from my hometown of Orlando, Florida, who was actually in the cockpit of a helicopter that was hit with a laser beam.

Lieutenant Smith is with the Seminole County Sheriff's Office. He and his partner were in a police helicopter searching for burglary suspects at night in a suburb of Orlando, when a red laser beam hit the aircraft twice. Lieutenant Smith said the Plexiglas windshield of the helicopter spread out the light to be the size of a basketball. It shocked them. They were flying near a large tower with a red light, and they mistakenly thought they may have flown too close to the tower. They were disoriented and they immediately jerked the helicopter back.

When they realized that they weren't near the tower, Lieutenant Smith began to worry that the light could have come from a laser site on a rifle. He wondered if they were about to be shot out of the sky? He told me, "It scared the heck out of us."

In reality, it was a 31-year old man, with a small, pen-sized laser light, standing in his yard.

Currently, a handful of state legislatures, including Florida's, are taking appropriate steps to address this matter. For example, on June 8, 2005, Governor Jeb Bush of Florida signed into law a bill making it illegal for any person to focus the beam of a laser lighting device at an aircraft. However, federal legislation is needed because aircrafts cross state lines and airports such as Ronald Reagan National Airport are located near state borders.

Clearly, this legislation before us is needed to ensure the safety of pilots and passengers in all situations, and I urge my colleagues to vote "Yes" on the legislation.