

Assuring The Future

Paul Rinaldi, president of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, outlines why legislative moves need to continue if the US ATC system is to move into the 21st century with confidence

Congress recently passed a short-term extension to the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) reauthorisation that will provide funding for the agency through the end of Fiscal Year 2017.

Although NATCA considers this to be a good start, we believe that lawmakers missed an opportunity to provide the type of transformative change that our nation's air traffic control (ATC) system desperately needs. We remain hopeful that the next Congress will take up the challenge to pass a long-term, comprehensive reauthorisation bill that will provide stable, predictable funding and put an end to both sequestration and the stop-and-go funding that has harmed the US National Airspace System (NAS).

Years of budget uncertainty have taken a toll on the growth and efficiency of the NAS. Controllers continue to work hard to maintain capacity, while keeping safety the top priority. But the lack of long-term budgetary stability has hampered the FAA's ability to advance the technology needed to bring the system into the 21st century.

In order for us to move forward, we must first take a step back to reflect on how we got here, why real, transformative change is so critical, and how the lack of a stable, predictable funding stream has led to serious problems for the NAS.

This lack of stable, predictable funding has hobbled the FAA's ability to finance and develop long-term modernisation projects, which has led to expensive and unacceptable delays in modernising the system's aging infrastructure.

The worst setback to date occurred in 2013, when automatic, across-the-board spending cuts, known as sequestration, required the FAA to suspend hiring and training new air traffic controllers for a year. Even worse, the FAA had to furlough controllers for part of that time. This resulted in extensive delays across the country for both passenger and cargo flights.

The consequences of that slowdown are still affecting the NAS today. The temporary hiring freeze left many air traffic control towers and radar control facilities critically understaffed. In fact, the FAA is now at a 27-year low for its Certified Professional Controller (CPC) staffing. Until this year, the FAA had missed its air traffic controller hiring goals in each of the last seven years.

Moreover, controller staffing has fallen nearly 10 per cent since 2011. As a result, air traffic controllers are working longer hours and, in many busy facilities in key locations such as Atlanta, New York, and Chicago, six-day workweeks are mandatory to pick up the slack. This creates more challenges. According to the National Transportation Safety Board, extended workdays and workweeks have led to significant fatigue problems. This has made fatigue one of the FAA's highest priority safety concerns.

We were encouraged that Congress included language in the extension that will improve the FAA's hiring process as a first step



toward easing the controller staffing crisis that has plagued our aviation system for far too long. This comes at a time when our nation's economy needs a vibrant, modern, and growing national airspace: one that requires a well-trained, properly sustained air traffic controller workforce. The hiring reforms included in the extension, along with ongoing collaborative efforts between NATCA and the FAA, are especially important to restoring the many understaffed facilities to the proper levels.

Achieving Key Objectives

Nevertheless, NATCA continues to maintain that any restructuring of the FAA and its funding mechanism must achieve four key objectives. First, any change must protect the workforce's relationship and entitlements with its employer. Second, it must maintain high standards of safety and efficiency. Third, it should establish a stable, predictable funding stream to adequately support air traffic control services, staffing, hiring and training, long-term modernisation projects, preventative maintenance, and ongoing modernisation to the physical infrastructure.

And finally, it must maintain a dynamic aviation system that continues to provide services to all segments of the aviation community, from commercial passenger carriers and cargo haulers, to business jets, to general aviation, from the major airports to those in rural America.

NATCA has already expressed its support for legislation that started an important discussion about how to finally move our ATC system into the 21st century. That legislation did not advance this year, but we are hopeful that the discussion will continue in the coming months and that we will eventually achieve comprehensive reform.

Our nation's economy depends on a vibrant, efficient aviation system. Lawmakers owe it to all US citizens, including the flying public, to fully examine the challenges and find solutions that set the nation's aviation system up for success well into the future. **ATM**