April 25, 2023

Dear Members of Congress:

The National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) represents nearly 20,000 air traffic controllers, engineers, and other aviation safety professionals dedicated to ensuring that America’s National Airspace System (NAS) is the safest and most efficient in the world. NATCA is deeply concerned with the potential consequences that the Limit, Save, Grow Act of 2023 (LSGA) would have on the NAS, its frontline workforce, and the entire aviation industry.

The LSGA proposes to cut discretionary spending beginning in fiscal year (FY) 2024 to FY 2022 levels, followed by annual caps through 2033. Although the legislation does not specify exactly to which agencies and programs these cuts should occur, it remains highly likely that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) would be subject to an immediate reduction in funding and any future funding would be severely constrained for the next decade. This would negatively affect the FAA in many of the same ways that sequestration cuts hobbled the agency and the aviation industry a decade ago.

Sequestration Was Extremely Damaging to the Aviation System

In March 2013, sequestration forced indiscriminate across-the-board spending cuts at federal agencies, including the FAA, as a result of the Budget Control Act of 2011, which used sequestration as a tool to reduce federal expenditures. In April 2013, sequestration forced the FAA to implement save money furloughs for all employees, including air traffic controllers, and to consider closing certain air traffic control towers to achieve the mandated spending cuts. During the week of April 21-27, 2013, when the furloughs were first implemented, they caused flight delays to nearly triple (compared to the same weeks in 2012 and 2014), before Congress passed the Reducing Flight Delays Act of 2013, which authorized the transfer funds from other FAA budget lines to its Operations (OPS) budget in order to prevent reduced operations and controller staffing for the rest of the fiscal year.

Although this temporary fix addressed the most immediate effects of flight delays, the effects of sequestration continued as FAA subsequently froze hiring partway through the year and postponed critical equipment upgrades and modernization activities. This resulted in FAA missing its hiring target by nearly 800 new controller trainees in FY13. The NAS cannot sustain these kinds of disruptions again, as they introduce unnecessary risk into the system while eroding the critical layers of support that maintain safety and efficiency. Specifically, NATCA is concerned with the negative effects that arbitrary, indiscriminate spending cuts and caps would have on the FAA’s OPS and Facilities & Equipment (F&E) budgets.

The Air Traffic Controller Staffing Crisis

In particular, the OPS budget is responsible for funding the safe and efficient operation of the NAS, including personnel costs and aviation safety activities. Although the FAA is slowly emerging from a 30-year low of fully certified controllers, which was exacerbated by
sequestration, there are 1,200 fewer fully certified controllers today than 10 years ago and FAA hiring has not kept up with attrition. Unfortunately, there is no quick fix to solve the current controller staffing challenges and resources are required to address it.

In recent months, FAA announced it would be upwardly adjusting its hiring goal for each of FY 2024-2026 to 1,800 new controller trainees—a positive step forward. The agency requested additional funding in its FY24 budget request to implement this plan. However, across-the-board cuts as envisioned by the LSGA, if implemented at FAA, would jeopardize the hiring surge. In addition, due to rigorous training standards, only 60% of all controller trainees reach full certification within three years (many of those who do not are removed or resign). Any increased hiring will take years to have positive effects on overall staffing levels. FAA must continue to be funded sufficiently to train each of the 1,800 new hires annually, and enactment of the LSGA would make that an impossibility.

Even before the LSGA’s across-the-board spending cuts were proposed, the FAA was already warning the public about anticipated widespread flight delays this summer from May 15 through Sept. 15, 2023. The FAA stated that staffing shortages would result in delays and reduced operations at airports in New York and Washington, D.C. during the peak summer travel period. This warning of increased delays comes on the heels of extensive, system-stifling delays originating in Florida in 2022 related to a variety of factors including air traffic controller staffing shortages in key facilities. Against this already challenging backdrop, according to FAA’s recent flight delays warning, nationwide fully-certified controller staffing averages only 81% of current needs.

**Delays to Critical Modernization & Infrastructure Programs**

In addition to the OPS budget, caps on discretionary spending also would have a tremendously negative effect on critical modernization and infrastructure programs that are funded through the F&E budget. Further cuts to the F&E budget—which already has failed to keep up with inflation over the past 14 years—would halt the agency’s ability to enhance the safety and efficiency of the NAS, let alone improve system capacity or integrate new users such as unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), advanced air mobility (AAM), and commercial space operations.

In FY 2009, the F&E budget was $2.942 billion. After sequestration in 2013, the F&E budget was subsequently lower than that in each fiscal year through 2017. Since then, it has remained just above or below $3 billion. Estimating for a modest 2% average annual inflation rate over the last 14 years, the FAA’s F&E budget would be over $3.8 billion based on its 2009 budget. This loss of buying power has required FAA to move to a “fix-on-fail” model, prioritizing only the most urgent needs and delaying implementation and deployment of important modernization programs, facility replacement, and radar and surveillance sustainment and replacement, among other important priorities. In order to meet all of the FAA’s capital needs in these areas, NATCA’s analysis indicates the FY23 F&E budget would need to be over $4.5 billion.
**FAA Requires Resources to Ensure Safety and Efficiency**

For these reasons, NATCA supports a budget proposal that would provide the FAA with discretionary budget authority to support the increased controller hiring and training necessary to meet growing air traffic demand as well as integrate new users, such as UAS, AAM, and commercial space launches into the NAS. Such a budget proposal also would need to increase investment in F&E funding to support critical modernization programs, infrastructure sustainment, and the timely repair of safety-critical technology throughout the NAS.

Ensuring the wise utilization of taxpayer dollars is a shared goal, and NATCA supports additional efforts by Congress to boost oversight and ensure that the FAA is maximizing available resources. However, this can be accomplished without widespread, across-the-board cuts. Recent history suggests that when this kind of cut does occur, it harms the traveling public and becomes the definition of “penny-wise and pound-foolish.”

Without adequate funding, the FAA will be hard pressed to maintain capacity, let alone expand the system for new entrants. NATCA urges all members of Congress to consider the damaging effects that indiscriminate, across-the-board cuts to discretionary spending would have on the NAS and the entire aviation industry.

Respectfully,

Richard Santa
President
National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA)