Statement on the National Aviation Operations Monitoring Service

by

Robert Dodd

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Good afternoon Mr. Chairman, members of the committee. My name is Dr. Robert Dodd and I appreciate the opportunity to address the committee on the National Aeronautics Operational Monitoring System, also known as NAOMS.

Between February 1998 and March 2005, a period of seven years, I served as the principal investigator for the NAOMS project. I participated in all aspects of the survey including its design, application, data analysis and project management, often in collaboration with Mr. Loren Rosenthal, the Battelle project manager for NAOMS. Battelle was the prime contractor for the project.

I consider myself extremely fortunate to have had the opportunity to be involved in NAOMS. This was a unique project based on thorough preparation and outstanding science. NASA managers provided the research team with the support and leadership needed to design and conduct an absolutely outstanding project. The research team itself was composed of an extremely well qualified and knowledgeable group of scientists whose commitment to the project was unparalleled. Finally and most importantly, I must acknowledge the commitment and effort of the hundreds of professional and general aviation pilots who helped us design the survey and the 24,000 pilots who donated over 12,000 hours of their time to tell us about their safety experiences in an effort to improve the safety of the Nation's air transportation system.

I was disappointed and perplexed when I learned that NASA decided the data collected by the NAOMS survey would not be released to the public. While I know that the most notable denial was that issued to the Associated Press, the Johns Hopkins University Center for Injury Research and Policy, a reputable safety research organization in addition to be a leading scholarly institution, was also denied.

Many different reasons were cited for NASA's refusal to release these data to the public. The press reported that NASA was concerned that the data might "frighten airline passengers" and this would have "a negative effect on the well being of the airlines." Press reports also indicted that other aviation organizations claimed that the NAOMS data were "soft data" and voluntarily submitted. The implication was that the NAOMS data were somehow of limited, or no value, because they originated with pilots voluntarily responding to a survey. Finally, there were press reports that stated NAOMS data were not needed because current FAA oversight systems provided an adequate picture of the safety performance of the National Airspace System.

I find these arguments without merit.

I believe the American public understands and accepts that travel by commercial airlines in the United States is the safest mode of travel in the world. Major air carrier crashes are thankfully

rare events. When a major crash occurs, it receives exceptional press coverage throughout the world, usually with images of destruction and chaos. Yet passengers continue to fly. I don't believe that the NAOMS data contained any information that could compare with the image of a crashed air carrier airplane or would increase passengers' fear of flying.

As for the criticisms that the NAOMS data are somehow limited or of no value because they are derived from a survey is also without merit. All data used for analysis, no matter its origin, have limitations and errors. Based on my experience, most if not all the databases used by the FAA for safety oversight and analysis contain errors and have limitations. This is why knowledgeable scientists and experts are involved in turning these data into useful information for decision makers. NAOMS data are no different in this regard. The NAOMS team made an extraordinary effort to clean and validate the data collected through the survey. The resulting data is of good quality and ready for meaningful analysis. Why would anyone decide that additional information, especially when it deals with the safety of the traveling public, should be hidden?

Finally, the belief that the NAOMS data are not needed because current safety oversight systems are adequate is untrue. Not all airlines have Flight Operational Quality Assessment (FOQA) programs or participate in the Aviation Safety Action Program (ASAP), a pilot based voluntary reporting system. Further, current safety oversight systems do not do a good job of measuring safety errors in the general aviation fleet, among small commercial operators, or among maintenance technicians, all of which have a direct influence on airline safety. A program like NAOMS can provide a unique oversight capability for all of the aviation system.

In closing I would like to encourage the committee to consider why a program like NAOMS is not currently operating. In most other aspects of public health and safety, US Government and industry organizations routinely use surveys to identify and understand risks to public safety and health. Many of these programs have been in existence for years and are central to evaluation and oversight of the Nation's health and safety.

A program like NAOMS can:
1. Help identify risks before they result in losses by obtaining information from those who are in the best position to know, the people operating the system.
2. Help evaluate the impact of new technology, an important consideration in light of all the changes occurring in the National Airspace System including the overhaul of the air traffic control system.
3. Provide quick insight into how well safety enhancements and improvements are working, a capability difficult to duplicate with today's oversight systems.

I believe NAOMS should be reinstituted and operated by an independent and unbiased organization. Such a program should receive funding directly from Congress to ensure its budget remains adequate to fulfill its mission.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this important issue.