

Statement by Senator Jim Bunning for the Senate Finance Subcommittee
Hearing on Reauthorization of the Airport and Airway Trust Fund

I want to thank Chairman Bingaman for calling this hearing. I would also like to thank our panel of witnesses for taking their time to appear before this subcommittee.

As all of us here know, it is time to reauthorize the Federal Aviation Administration, including how we pay for it. This presents Congress with an opportunity to make meaningful and lasting changes that will help Americans travel by air.

America has a tradition of pioneering in air traffic control that it can be proud of. Yet, the United States has been using a system for air traffic control that has essentially been in place since the Eisenhower Administration. In fact, the location of ground-based radio beacons used in the current system to guide aircraft are in many cases the same spots used by old-fashioned signal fires to guide mail delivery flights in the 1920s.

The United States acted as pioneers in the creation of air traffic control during the dawn of commercial aviation, but it is now stuck with the system it created. Many developing countries, which are for the first time setting up air traffic control systems, are implementing more advanced systems.

I would like to see the United States maintain its edge. Frankly, we don't have much of a choice. The number of people flying is still growing, even if the system of managing the planes that they fly on is not. According to the Air Transport Association, there will be about 61,000 flights per day in 2016, compared to 45,000 per day now. We must be able to handle this enormous increase.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of deregulating the commercial airline industry in 1978 has been the fall in ticket prices. Now almost anyone can afford to fly. Previously, flying was only possible for the wealthy. It appears obvious that demand for air travel will continue to rise. If the supply of flights is limited because we can't accommodate any more planes on our outdated air traffic control system, then perhaps we will backslide to the point where only wealthy Americans will be able to fly. That would be a shame.

I understand that there is some controversy about how to pay for this upgrade. It is my hope that, with the help of our witnesses, this hearing will be able to aid us in finding an equitable way to do this. I look forward to the panel's testimony and I thank the Subcommittee for its time.