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HELICOPTER ASSOCIATION INTERNATIONAL

**TESTIMONY ON
TRANSITION FROM FAA TO CONTRACTOR-OPERATED
FLIGHT SERVICE STATIONS: LESSONS LEARNED**

**COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

OCTOBER 10, 2007

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Dedicated to the advancement of the civil helicopter industry

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Good morning Mr. Chairman, and Members of the House Aviation Subcommittee. My name is Matt Zuccaro, and I am the President of the Helicopter Association International.

I am honored to appear before you today and sincerely appreciate the opportunity to address this most important topic. I respectfully request that you accept my full written testimony into the official record.

HAI is a not-for-profit, professional trade association of over 2,600 members, inclusive of 1,400 companies and organizations. Member companies include helicopter and heliport operators, manufacturers, and industry support organizations. Unlike many other trade associations, operations conducted by HAI members are not limited to one type of specific flying or purpose. HAI members operate helicopters across a wide spectrum of uses, such as on-demand charter, offshore oil and gas platform support, utility services, corporate support, public service, law enforcement, emergency services, agricultural, as well as private use.

We are here today to discuss the FAA transition to contractor-operated Automated Flight Service Stations and to draw valuable lessons as the FAA draws closer to implementation of the recently awarded Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast (ADS-B) contract. ADS-B will usher in a new air traffic control system that will dramatically increase air traffic efficiency. The prime contractor, ITT Corporation, will build the ADS-B ground stations and own and operate the equipment, with the FAA paying a subscription charge for ADS-B broadcasts transmitted to properly equipped aircraft and air traffic control facilities.

As Members of this committee are aware, helicopters play a crucial role in the Gulf of Mexico energy production process, taking supplies and employees to and from oil platforms. Nearly 3 million passengers are transported via helicopters over the Gulf of Mexico en route to various oil platforms each year. The numbers are astonishing: over 400,000 flight hours per year, with over 10,000 passengers and over 3,400 flights being flown each day.

Earlier this year, helicopter traffic in the Gulf region was negatively impacted when the transition to contractor-operated flight service stations resulted in the closure of several AFSS stations in the Gulf region. The AFSS contractor was totally unfamiliar with offshore helicopter operations in the Gulf, thus incapable of determining the ultimate impact on our industry of closing those AFSS stations.

As a result, helicopter pilots immediately began experiencing delays of 30 to 45 minutes when filing flight plans, resulting in excessive hold times. Furthermore, even when flight plans were filed, flight plans were lost by the contractor or missing when the pilot made a call for a clearance. The contractor personnel manning the flight service operations center were unfamiliar with the flight protocol for the Gulf of Mexico – they lacked knowledge of the special IFR grid structure for helicopter flight plans in the Gulf and in many instances, these operators were located many thousands of miles away from the AFSS facility they were ultimately connected with. This situation resulted in significant delays and could have severely impacted the safety of thousands of workers on oil rigs had the 2007 hurricane season brought forth a major Category 3, 4, or 5 storm in the Gulf.

To accomplish the missions helicopter pilots are tasked with each day, seamless and uninterrupted service by a qualified vendor is vital. Flight delays cost the oil industry lost production time, and during periods of rapidly approaching storms, prompt and timely evacuation of thousands of employees from offshore oil platforms and drilling sites increases the tempo. Even more serious, especially in the 9-11 era, is the important knowledge of squawk codes for NORAD (North American Radar Defense). Simply stated, the Gulf of Mexico is a unique area.

Only after direct intervention by the FAA Administrator and Members of this Committee, did Lockheed Martin sit down with our industry in Houston to address our concerns, develop procedures and processes to meet the needs of the offshore community, familiarize themselves with operations in the Gulf, and most importantly, ensure safety of helicopter operations from the panhandle of Florida all the way to Corpus Christi, Texas. Unfortunately, during the transition to contractor-operated Flight Service Stations, tremendous FAA institutional knowledge about gulf aviation operations was lost, and the pleas of our pilots fell on deaf ears until senior FAA leadership and Congress stepped in.

I am happy to inform this committee that local operating procedures have now been written by the Fort Worth Hub Plans and Procedures Specialist. A dedicated, direct phone line, with calls restricted to Gulf of Mexico operations, has now been established by Lockheed Martin, easing pilot difficulties when utilizing satellite phones (automatic numeric menus and satellite phones don't integrate well). The line became effective on or about August 6; however, this occurred several months after pilots began pleading for help.

HAI's partnership with the FAA in the form of a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) to support low altitude weather and communications in the Gulf will facilitate Phase I of the ADS-B technology. The helicopter industry has made a significant commitment to assist the FAA in ADS-B Phase I, providing in-kind services valued in excess of \$100 million over the life of the project – to include helicopter transport for FAA and contract personnel and space on offshore platforms where equipment will be installed.

The approach the FAA has taken in laying the groundwork for ADS-B Phase I is unprecedented. The agency is listening, truly listening, and working closely with industry as this initiative moves forward. I sincerely hope that once the ADS-B contract is fully implemented and serious work gets underway that I will be able to make the same statement. It is a tragic shame when a contractor doesn't work with and listen to customer concerns and it becomes necessary for industry to come to your doorstep.

I am optimistic that initiatives such as this hearing, will avert such a situation with regard to the implementation of ADS-B technology, the first phase of the NexGen system.

Thank you for providing this opportunity to speak with you regarding this important matter.

