ORAL TESTIMONY OF
CAPTAIN RORY KAY, EXECUTIVE AIR SAFETY CHAIRMAN
AIR LINE PILOTS ASSOCIATION, INTERNATIONAL
BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
ATC MODERNIZATION AND NEXTGEN
NEAR-TERM ACHIEVABLE GOALS
MARCH 18, 2009

Good morning. I am Capt. Rory Kay, Executive Air Safety Chairman of the Air Line Pilots Association, International.

I would like to express my appreciation to the distinguished members of this subcommittee for drawing attention to the urgent need to modernize our national airspace system, or NAS, and for highlighting the solutions that exist today that can swiftly make a difference for passengers, shippers, and all who rely on air transportation.

It is an honor to represent ALPA's more than 52,000 pilots who are at work in the cockpit every day.

For decades, ALPA has pushed to modernize the NAS. The need for action has now become critical. The latest technology, which capitalizes on space-based communications, navigation, and surveillance systems, can provide precision and efficiency never before possible.

Modernization promises to advance safety, increase capacity, reduce delays, and play an essential role in cutting emissions to help address climate change.

We saw a record number of flight delays last summer. Passengers and shippers all paid the price for a system stretched beyond its limits. Government and industry worked together to solve the immediate problem, but air traffic congestion persists, and an outdated system remains the cause.

A sustained funding source must be central to any discussion of modernizing our airspace. A project of this scale and significance cannot stop and start because of sporadic funding.

Modernization will be expensive and everyone who benefits should pay their fair share. It will also be a complicated and long-term undertaking. For this reason, it must be done right the first time.

We also need to move ahead in a way that reflects two lessons our industry has already learned about airspace modernization.

First, we can, and we must, leverage equipment and technology that is already on the airplane. Airlines have complained for years about sending planes to the bone yard with equipment that could have facilitated more efficient routing, but was never fully used.

The second lesson is that we do our best work when all stakeholders are involved. A collaborative partnership among government, the operators, and the front-line professionals is essential.

This hearing is focused on how we can make progress now. There's encouraging news.

ADS-B promises to increase safety and provide air traffic facilities with greater reach and precision than the current air traffic control radar. The up-to-the-second traffic information could also make a quantum leap in preventing runway incursions. Both the In and Out aspects of the ADS-B technology are necessary to realize the true potential of NextGen and we must continue our commitment to both.

For decades, ground-based technology forced pilots to "connect the dots" by flying from one navigational aid to the next to reach their destination. The limited number of ground-based aids rarely provided the shortest or most efficient route.

RNAV, or area navigation technology, allows use of shorter, more direct routes. This can increase efficiency, reduce departure delays, cut taxi time, save fuel, and alleviate congestion.

FAA has done a good job implementing RNAV procedures here in DC and in other parts of the country. However, the technology is too often used only to continue flying traditional procedures. These so-called “overlays” use new technology to fly old, and frequently inefficient, paths. It is time to maximize RNAV by leveraging it to design completely new procedures.

Still another example of an opportunity to make progress right now, Required Navigation Performance or RNP procedures, can allow flights to safely land on runways in worse weather than conventional procedures. Using RNP, Alaska Airlines pilots were able to safely continue more than 900 approaches in 2006 that would otherwise have been diverted due largely to weather.

We are already seeing some benefit from RNAV and RNP, but the potential exists for much more. We urge the FAA to lead the effort toward making the most of all that these technologies offer.

In conclusion, with all of this talk of technology, it is important to remember that a well-trained pilot is the airliner's greatest safety asset. Even with the newest technology and automation, pilots must still have timely, accurate information, so that we can react swiftly, if a flight doesn't go as planned. Our partners, the professional air traffic controllers, also need accurate, reliable information on which to base their decisions.

No one is more aware of how these new technologies come together with a stressed air transportation system than airline pilots. And that leads me to one final point. If it doesn’t work for pilots when we fly the line, a procedure that may look great on paper will not help us capture the enormous potential of NextGen. Professional airline pilots and controllers must be involved every step of the way.

Thank you.