



**Oral Testimony of Mark Reis,
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before the

House Subcommittee on Aviation

“Wildlife Strikes—How Airports are Helping to Manage the Risks”

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Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of Airports Council International. My name is Mark Reis and I am the Managing Director of the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. I am here today to describe how airports work to reduce the risks of aircraft wildlife strikes and to highlight the challenges we face in doing so.

The Flight 1549 accident has dramatically highlighted the threat posed by wildlife strikes. [SHOW SLIDE 1] The number of these strikes reported to the FAA has more than quadrupled from 1,759 in 1990 to a record high of 7,666 in 2007. FAA strike data also indicate that most strikes take place at or near airports.

Airports are important partners with the Federal Aviation Administration and the Department of Agriculture's Animal and Plant Inspection Service and Wildlife Services in mitigating the risks that wildlife pose to aircraft operations. The FAA requires commercial service airports to "undertake immediate action to alleviate wildlife hazards whenever they are detected." Airports are also required to have a qualified wildlife biologist conduct a wildlife hazard assessment in the event that an air carrier aircraft ingests wildlife into its engines, is substantially damaged by a wildlife strike, or experiences multiple wildlife strikes -- or if wildlife are observed in a manner that could cause an aircraft to experience one of those situations.

Oftentimes, airports then develop a wildlife hazard management plan. These plans contain specific actions to minimize or eliminate wildlife hazards through habitat modifications, land use changes, and wildlife population management.

The costs of wildlife management programs vary considerably from airport to airport, but some airports spend \$250,000 or more per year on their programs. Funds from the Airport Improvement Program can be used to pay for a portion of costs associated with habitat modification projects and wildlife management equipment. However, ongoing operating expenses associated with these programs are typically not eligible for federal funding and are borne by airports themselves.

At Sea-Tac, we have had an extensive program to manage wildlife hazards in place for over 30 years. [SHOW SLIDE 2] Sea-Tac is located in a highly urbanized area of western Washington, about two miles east of Puget Sound, and in one of North America's four major migratory bird flyways.

Sea-Tac has implemented a number of measures to prevent wildlife strikes. For example, our landscaping includes only plants that do not produce fruits, nuts, or berries. Grass is kept at an optimal height to decrease wildlife use of the airfield for food and cover. We have also developed our own specialized grass mix that is "wildlife-resistant."

We also actively work to harass and relocate problem species we find on airport. The airport holds permits issued by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that allow us to harass certain bird species, relocate raptors (hawks, owls, and ospreys), and lethally remove individual migratory birds that lose their "fright-flight" response.

We have incorporated wildlife management considerations into our wetland mitigation efforts and stormwater facility designs. [SHOW SLIDE 3] For example, stormwater ponds were designed with liners and netting specifically to

exclude wildlife and the aquatic vegetation that attracts it. We have recently created within a few hundred yards of our new runway 60 acres of wetlands that are specifically designed so as not to attract birds.

In cooperation with researchers at the University of Illinois, we are exploring enhanced wildlife monitoring through use of an avian radar system that was installed in August 2007. [SHOW SLIDE 4] This system acts like a powerful pair of eyes capable of seeing farther and higher than a human observer -- 24 hours a day. Data from the system is being used to help confirm that hazardous bird activity is not increasing near the airport's stormwater ponds and to help identify wildlife trends. However, avian radar is not yet a "silver bullet" solution that can be used by pilots and air traffic controllers to avoid birds in real-time.

I want to address three key challenges that airports face in our efforts to manage wildlife hazards—off-airport land use, conflicting and overlapping regulations, and funding. First, local zoning and permitting practices can result in the construction of wildlife attractants near airports. Our aviation system would benefit if airports had stronger mechanisms to control land uses in their vicinity when safety is at stake.

Another issue involves complex and often contradictory federal, state, and local laws and regulations regarding wildlife management and habitat protection. In some cases state laws restrict the types of trapping methods that airport officials can use to manage wildlife and the use of lethal removal -- even when such actions are permitted under federal laws. In the case of Sacramento International Airport, the risk of criminal prosecution by state officials resulted in the airport ceasing

certain wildlife removal and harassment activities. Airports in Florida have encountered a similar situation and have been working with state legislators to pass legislation that would exempt airport wildlife managers from state and local prosecution.

Clean Water Act and National Environmental Policy Act requirements relating to wetlands can make it difficult, expensive, and time-consuming for airports to modify wildlife-attracting wetlands on and near airports to reduce their wildlife strike risks. Providing simpler, streamlined permitting and environmental review processes when safety is at stake would help airports manage wildlife hazards more consistently with federal aviation regulations.

Finally, airports – especially smaller airports -- need funding to implement and maintain effective wildlife management programs. The FAA can provide critically important funding for setting up these programs. However, their ongoing operating costs must be funded by airport operating budgets, which are already under considerable strain due to the current economic crisis.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for allowing me to share a little about airports' efforts to manage the risks associated with wildlife strikes. I am happy to answer any questions.