Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association

Subcommittee on Aviation

House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee

Hearing on: "FAA Reauthorization: Securing the Future of General Aviation"

Submitted by:

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INTRODUCTION

Chairman Graves, Ranking Member Cohen and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to provide the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association's (or AOPA) perspective on "Securing the Future of General Aviation."

AOPA is the world's largest aviation membership organization, representing the general aviation interests of more than 300,000 aircraft owners and pilots across the country. Our members collectively operate over 85% of all general aviation (GA) aircraft in the United States and represent two-thirds of all pilots.

AOPA was founded in 1939, and for 84 years, we have stayed true to our mission of protecting the freedom to fly. Safety remains AOPA's north star -- guiding, protecting, and promoting this uniquely American experience, so we can pass it along, better than we received it, to the next generation of aviators. Introducing the next generation of Americans, especially young people from diverse backgrounds into aviation and aerospace is vital to our industry's future.

IMPACT OF GENERAL AVIATION:

General aviation in America provides a significant economic impact to the communities in which we all live and fly – GA is a $247 billion industry and supports more than 1.2 million jobs.

Through the network of more than 5,000 public-use airports across the country, which is 10 times the amount served by commercial airlines, as well as over 14,700 privately owned landing facilities nationwide, general aviation is an integral part of the transportation system that supports communities across the United States, especially in rural areas. GA is simply institutional in the fabric of America.

General aviation provides a great deal of public-benefit flying in times of need. These vital operations include emergency medical personnel and supplies delivery, disaster relief and recovery, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance, law enforcement, agricultural aviation activities, and much more. GA also provides the most efficient and cost-effective way to conduct wildlife surveys, map wetland losses and soil erosion, and detect pipeline spills.

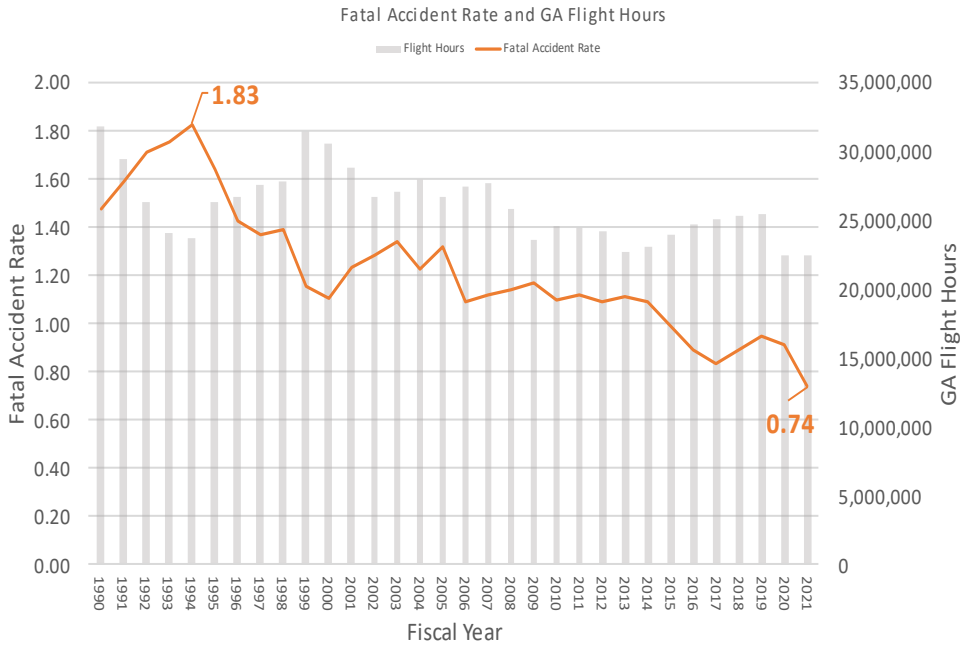
The Committee's leadership in several areas impacting GA are noteworthy including the BasicMed program, in which nearly 80,000 pilots in the United States having completed the requirements to fly safely since the program's inception.

We are encouraged Full Committee Chairman Graves announced he will include a standalone general aviation title in the upcoming FAA Reauthorization bill. I know others have also expressed support for this valuable inclusion, and we look forward to working with all Members of the Committee to help secure the future of general aviation.

IMPROVING GENERAL AVIATION SAFETY:

The FAA operates the largest, most complicated, and safest aviation system in the world. While every aircraft accident makes headline news, what does not make the news is that general aviation comprises 26 million flight hours per year, representing more than 30 million takeoffs and landings by hundreds of thousands of general aviation pilots.

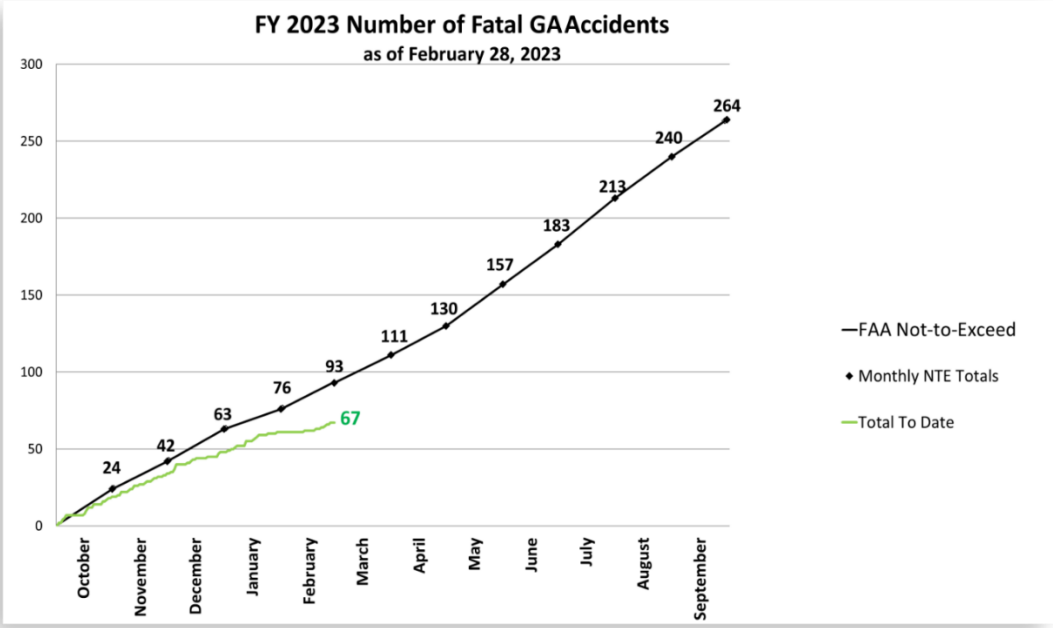
In short, general aviation has never been safer – and it's getting safer every day. According to the latest available data through fiscal year (FY) 2021 - see chart below - the general aviation fatal accident rate has fallen to just 0.74 occurrences per 100,000 flight hours. This rate is less than half of what it was in the mid-1990s.



What is as impressive, and demonstrates this strong safety culture of GA, is that this ongoing, steady decline has happened while the skies are busier than ever. When I'm asked if GA is safe – I don't hesitate with a resounding "absolutely."

The General Aviation Joint Safety Committee (GAJSC), co-chaired by leaders from AOPA's Air Safety Institute (ASI) and the FAA, analyzes mishap data to develop safety recommendations and drive implementation across the industry. Once again, we are on track to exceed the safety goal established by the GAJSC which will result in another 10% reduction in fatal accidents over ten years.

As indicated in the chart below, the outlook for GA safety continues to improve as the number of fatal GA accidents so far in FY23 are below the goals established by the GAJSC.



While we have come a long way in general aviation safety and achieved impressive results there is always so much more we can do. Safety is embedded in our culture and our highly respected Air Safety Institute continues to work every day to educate and improve safety where we can.

FILLING THE AVIATION WORKFORCE PIPELINE:

Aviation—whether GA, commercial, or military—cannot exist without qualified professionals to fly, design, build, operate, and maintain our crewed and uncrewed aircraft. Today, we face a critical shortage of workers in all these fields.

The Boeing Pilot and Technician Outlook for 2022-2041 predicts that the long-term demand for newly qualified aviation personnel remains strong, as 602,000 new pilots, 610,000 new maintenance technicians and 899,000 new cabin crew members will be needed worldwide over the next 20 years.

In North America alone, Boeing predicts the need for 435,000 personnel, including 128,000 new pilots, 134,000 new technicians and 173,000 new cabin crew members during this time period.

Most people that aspire to become aviators start in general aviation, so it is important that we collaborate on efforts to ensure that this pipeline remains open to all. AOPA has taken a leadership role in attracting young people interested in aviation by making major investments in high school and STEM curriculum.

Through the AOPA Foundation, we have developed a rigorous four-year high school aviation STEM curriculum. AOPA High School Aviation STEM Curriculum is now in more than 400 schools in 43 states, engaging more than 16,300 students. Since the program's inception five years ago, we have reached more than 50,000 students, and a full 70% of those who have graduated report they are actively pursuing an aviation career.

Moreover, nearly half of our curriculum students are students of color, with more than 20% female. This participation represents a significant increase in diversity when compared to the current aviation workforce.

Congress and this Committee has played an important role to address the workforce challenges as well. The 2018 FAA Reauthorization law included two aviation workforce development programs (aircraft pilots and aviation maintenance technicians) which had strong bipartisan support. These programs, commonly referred to as Section 625 and authorized at $5 million per year through FY23 have helped introduce high school students and others to science, technology, engineering, math (STEM) aviation education and opportunities.

However, workforce issues are not a core mission of the FAA and with the Section 625 grant programs set to expire, now is the time to establish the National Center for the Advancement of Aviation (NCAA) and let the FAA focus on modernizing the air traffic control system, the NOTAM system, the pilot medical system, the aircraft registration

system, and airman and aircraft certification, these are the primary safety and regulatory functions of the FAA.

NATIONAL CENTER FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF AVIATION ACT:

During the 117th Congress, bipartisan and bicameral legislation was introduced to establish a National Center for the Advancement of Aviation (HR 3482/S. 1752) to address the aviation workforce challenges our industry faces. We appreciate the leadership of this Committee to move the bill which overwhelmingly passed the House last September by a vote of 369-56.

A national aviation center would create programs to further build a diverse and skilled aviation workforce and ensure the deployment of STEM aviation educational opportunities for middle and high school students. In fact, the center would do more to grow, develop, and promote aviation and bring the needed and long overdue collaboration of our collective industry that is so vital to our nation's economy.

The NCAA has the support of the entire aviation industry from general aviation, airlines, unions, airports, and others.

We look forward to working with the Committee to advance this bipartisan legislation once again.

PUBLIC-USE AIRPORTS/TRANSIENT RAMPS/PRICING TRANSPARENCY:

Our nation's public-use airports are clearly a valuable and critical part of America's infrastructure.

AOPA has heard from thousands of our members and pilots across the country who are frustrated when they land at airports and learn of unexpected fees being levied by FBOs even when not receiving or requesting services and often surprised at the amounts being charged.

Fixed based operators (FBO) owned by small companies or by the airport sponsor do a great job making their parking fees transparent and provide excellent service to pilots of all types of aircraft. However there remains a general lack of transparency of parking fees charged by the major fixed based operators (FBO), as well as the lack of transient parking areas at federally funded public-use airports. Everywhere I travel, I hear from AOPA members who believe there needs to be a requirement for FBOs to make their fees transparent and easily available to pilots like any other product or service today.

The type of fees charged to pilots by the FBOs include tie-down fees, facility fees, infrastructure fees, access fees, security fees, and handling fees. AOPA receives thousands of complaints from pilots who are often charged for services they don't even ask for or receive. There is absolutely no reason a pilot should be charged exorbitant fees to park his or her aircraft when receiving no services from the FBO. It doesn't happen on our nation's highway rest areas, and it shouldn't happen at public-use airports.

We believe pilots should have the information they need to make informed preflight planning decisions before landing at a public-use airport. In 2018, AOPA led a voluntary industry campaign known as “Know Before You Go” to encourage FBOs to publicly list their fees online. Most FBOs serve the general aviation community by balancing their need for profitability with the need to provide reasonable prices, and while a vast majority of FBOs now openly disclose their pricing, many still don’t. After four years of direct outreach to the chain FBO companies to encourage parking fee transparency, at least 25% of these FBOs are still not complying with the “Know Before You Go” program.

While the call for fee and pricing transparency has been a voluntary effort, we believe pilots have a right to know, before they fly, what fees they should expect when arriving at an airport and what they cost.

In addition to fee and pricing transparency, we hear from thousands of members about the lack of GA transient aircraft parking space, especially at airports where a chain FBO controls the entire parking ramp or has a monopoly position. Upon landing at these airports, pilots are directed to the FBO parking ramp, where many only stay for a few hours and do not need or require the services of the FBO. It is no surprise these pilots are outraged when presented with a bill, in the hundreds if not thousands of dollars to simply park their aircraft or drop off a passenger.

AOPA was recently made aware of a pilot who flew his single engine turboprop-powered aircraft from Ormond Beach, Florida to the St Augustine airport for lunch – about a twenty-minute flight. He was directed to park at the only FBO on the airport, and after a one-hour visit, he was presented with parking and security fees totaling $280.00. A flight instructor and a student pilot landed at an airport so the student could use the restroom – 10 minutes – and the pilot was charged $80. We have thousands of examples like these.

We also dedicated considerable time and resources over the last four years to research how GA transient parking areas are depicted at the 700 public-use airports with published airport diagrams. Just last year, the FAA agreed to publish guidance to airports in using these terms to describe GA parking areas, which includes the term “GA Transient Apron”. This term describes a parking area where transient general aviation operators can park their aircraft without FBO services and may be subject to a fair and reasonable fee if the airport decided to implement such a fee.

The FAA is planning to expand the number of diagramed airports from 700 to 3,000 in the near future and airport managers will be asked to choose the appropriate standardized labels for their diagrams. We appreciate the FAA’s action in this area, but with the large number of complaints about high parking fees charged by chain FBOs and the lack of GA transient parking options at federally funded public-use airports, we believe the Committee should address these issues.

We believe public-use airports should be required to designate a transient GA parking area to be made available to pilots of all privately operated general aviation aircraft, regardless of make or model. Additionally, airports should retain the ability to either waive a transient fee or impose a transient fee, so long as that fee is fair and reasonable (essentially whatever it costs the airport to operate and maintain the ramp).

We have a national system of airports and designating GA transient parking should not be delegated to airports as a local issue. With the recent increase in FBO consolidation, including equity firms acquiring large chain FBOs and expecting a return on their investment, this lack of fair and reasonably priced GA transient parking at public-use airports is troubling.

At the few hundred airports that provide commercial air service, and also support high levels of GA aircraft, airport managers must satisfy TSA security requirements to maintain their FAA Part 139 certification. These airports should also be required to designate GA transient parking areas, and pilots wishing to use these GA transient parking areas should be allowed to apply for TSA security badges for access when they are located near commercial service activities. This would also eliminate the need for added security personnel and would help defray any additional security costs at these airports.

The Committee should consider addressing the transient ramp issue. Such a proposal should include the following:

1) All public-use airports should have a transient ramp space (construct or designate) and have the ability to charge a fair and reasonable fee (cost to operate and maintain);

2) Transient ramp space should be made available to all privately-operated aircraft, regardless of make or model;

3) Private pilots should have the ability to apply for a SIDA badge to defray security costs at airports where TSA security requirements are in place; and

4) Public-use airports should be required to either impose a fair and reasonable fee and continue to have the ability to waive fees (like many small and municipal airports do today).

Need for Additional GA Hangars:

Another area of concern to GA's future is the decreasing supply of general aviation hangars across the country. Aircraft hangars are integral to the utility of any airport and invite economic investment and growth to local communities. They are also increasingly important, and sometimes required by aircraft insurance companies, to protect the fabric or composite airframes of aircraft, new and old.

Airports wishing to build new hangars find that federal AIP funds are not prioritized for GA hangar construction, and the price to build hangars usually exceeds the airports' ability to pay for them outright.

In 2021, AOPA conducted a national survey of 800 airports and found that 71% of airports have a shortage of individual GA hangars. In fact, 55% of those surveyed said they have the land to develop additional hangars but do not have the financial resources to do so. Airport managers also report that hangars provide 45% of their gross revenue, making hangars a critical source of financial self-sustainability for any GA airport.

Even if an airport is in the National Plan of Integrated Airport Systems (NPIAS), hangars are generally not approved for AIP funding due to other priorities.

Certain airports are turning to the construction of corporate hangars and have developed plans, which the FAA has approved, to remove smaller less profitable hangars to make room for the larger more profitable hangars. Therefore, small aircraft hangars are systematically replaced with larger corporate hangars, forcing these aircraft off the airport or parking outside where they are subjected to wind, rain, sun, and snow. This happened recently when over 70 GA storage hangars were replaced with corporate hangars at a Scottsdale, Arizona airport, and it is about to happen with 51 hangars at the Birmingham-Shuttleworth airport in Alabama.

Under current FAA policy, hangars are among the lowest priorities for AIP funding and grants for hangar development are rarely issued. With a nationwide shortage of small aircraft storage hangars, we need to protect the ones we have while also investing in the development of new GA hangars to meet the overwhelming demand.

We believe Congress should dedicate adequate AIP funding for GA hangar development. The result is securing the future of GA and a win-win as airports would gain a much-needed source of sustainable revenue, and pilots would be able to protect the investment in their aircraft. The new hangars would attract additional aircraft which would boost the airports economic contribution to the community and improve the airport's ability to achieve financial self-sustainability.

Crosswind Runways:

Crosswind runways enhance the safety and capacity of the National Plan of Integrated Airport Systems. Nearly one third of airports in the NPIAS have a crosswind runway in addition to the airport's primary runway. They were constructed at airports where changes in wind conditions during certain periods made the primary runway unsafe to use. Like all pavement, crosswind runways require periodic maintenance, or they deteriorate until they become unserviceable. Although runway projects are supposed to be among the highest priority projects, current FAA policy has created an insurmountable barrier for hundreds of airports in the system to maintain their crosswind runways.

GA's excellent safety record is attributable, in part, to the existence of more than 900 crosswind runways. They are critically important to light GA aircraft, particularly those with conventional landing gear. If crosswind runways are allowed to deteriorate, it will affect flight safety. Moreover, flight training will be hindered as student pilots will be grounded when crosswinds prevail.

Today's FAA policy fails to account for the diversity and limitations of GA aircraft. It focuses on the most demanding (usually heaviest or fastest) aircraft to use an airport. These aircraft can tolerate stronger crosswinds than lighter, smaller aircraft can. What may be a safe crosswind level for large aircraft is often not safe for light GA aircraft. Yet, once it is determined that the airport is safe for large aircraft, the needs of light GA aircraft are not considered unless very specific, unrealistic conditions are met.

As we look to make meaningful investments in airports, Congress should direct the FAA to make grants available for crosswind runway projects in a manner that serves all segments of aviation.

Non-Primary Entitlement Program:

The Airport Improvement Program provides federal grants for the planning and development of public-use airports that are included in the National Plan of Integrated Airport Systems. Funding for small general aviation airports comes partly from AIP grants under the Non-Primary Entitlement (NPE) category and discretionary account. GA airports are each currently eligible to receive up to $150,000 in annual entitlements.

The entitlements are often not enough to finance projects and are often unused and returned to the FAA discretionary account.

We believe Congress should reform the NPE program to ensure funds are spent at airports for which they are intended. This action will also help secure the future of general aviation.

AOPA works closely with our partners at DOT, FAA, and other federal agencies on the many issues that impact general aviation and pilots. We value the work that has been accomplished but more can be done to benefit the general aviation community.

Designated Pilot Examiners (DPEs):

For several years now, pilots have raised concerns regarding the lack of availability of designated pilot examiners (DPEs) across the country. To become a certified pilot, an individual must complete numerous flight examinations throughout their flight training which are typically performed by delegates of the FAA, known as DPEs.

The next generation of aviation professionals will be unable to meet their aviation dreams without adequate availability and access to DPEs to take and complete the required FAA flight examinations. While the FAA has implemented some programs that have provided limited relief, designee availability remains a challenge. To ensure the future growth of the pilot population, especially with the increased demand for flight training and this nation's overall need for pilots, additional DPE reform is needed to ensure an adequate number of DPEs are available and accessible.

To address these concerns, Congress should require the FAA to implement the recommendations in the report from the Designated Pilot Examiner Reform Working Group to ensure an adequate number of designees are available. Additionally, the FAA should complete a review of current DPEs for their activity and replace DPEs not performing an appropriate number of examinations, while ensuring newly selected examiners can fully support applicants in their area. Additional focus must be placed on selecting DPEs who do not provide examinations exclusively to one school to ensure trained applicants at schools without examining authority have appropriate access to DPE services.

Flight Training:

The FAA has long recognized the importance of pilots obtaining flight instruction in the aircraft they intend to operate. Doing so ensures pilots have access to relevant training, experience, and flight testing in the specific aircraft to be flown, which is a significant factor in making our aviation system the safest in the world.

Unfortunately, pilots and flight instructors who operate certain categories of aircraft suddenly had their accessibility to flight instruction and flight testing restricted due to a 2021 FAA legal argument that instruction and testing as carrying a person “for hire” like a commercial carrier.

With the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee’s leadership and support, the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2023 included language that addressed the 2021 FAA directive. Unfortunately, the final version only addressed a

small sector of the general aviation industry and it did not fully return the flight training accessibility to what had been in place for over 70 years.

Since at least 1949, student instruction was not considered carriage of goods or persons for compensation or hire. For safety, we must restore this commonsense approach and Congress should direct the FAA to mandate that student instruction, flight training and testing shall not be considered carrying persons or property for compensation or hire. This clarification will restore safety in the National Airspace System through reducing barriers to training and will reduce the FAA's administrative burdens.

Aircraft Registration Renewal and Registration Numbers:

With the Committee's leadership to change the aircraft registration renewal from three years to seven years under the 2018 FAA Reauthorization Act, we are pleased the FAA has finally moved the aircraft registration renewal period to seven years. The extension from three to seven years will have a positive effect on reducing the FAA's unacceptable backlog of registration renewals of six months and sometimes longer.

However, while the FAA registry has been making progress to reduce the backlog from a high of over 190 days to under 120 days, there is still a long way to go for the FAA to get down to a reasonable renewal time. Congress should mandate a review of the FAA's aircraft registration system and require the agency to come up with a plan to bring the registration process time down to 30 days in the near term.

In addition, the FAA should ensure that once an aircraft owner submits a renewal application and it is accepted into the FAA registry for processing, the temporary registration remains in effect until the permanent registration is received, regardless of how long the FAA takes to provide the permanent registration.

Another concern is aircraft registration numbers (or N numbers) being routinely reserved via computers and held in bulk which can unfairly eliminate the possibility of general aviation aircraft owners from obtaining the registration numbers they request. Some companies reserving N numbers in bulk are then selling them for exorbitant fees to aircraft owners desiring the N number. The current process is unfair by not allowing aircraft owners to obtain desired registration numbers. To address this unfair and predatory practice, Congress should require the FAA to review how registration numbers are reserved and enact process changes to ensure fair participation by eliminating computer-generated bulk reservations for aircraft registration numbers.

UNLEADED AVIATION FUEL AND THE EAGLE INITIATIVE:

There is no more pressing issue that general aviation faces today than the need to transition to 100% unleaded fuel.

We in General Aviation want lead out of fuel but it must be done in a safe and smart way.

The general aviation community and FAA have been working to find an unleaded fuel for more than a decade, now with two approval pathways: the Piston Aviation Fuels Initiative (PAFI), a public-private initiative, and Supplemental Type Certificate (STC), which allows the FAA to approve fuels developed by private entities. Congress has strongly supported the effort, and since FY12, Congress has appropriated $57 million to PAFI, which includes an additional $10 million provided in the FY23 Omnibus Appropriations bill.

Just last year, the FAA gave STC approval for virtually the entire GA piston fleet for a 100-octane unleaded avgas developed by General Aviation Modifications Inc. (GAMI) of Oklahoma. GAMI is currently working on commercializing its fuel, encompassing the refinement, logistics, and storage needed to get this fuel to our airports.

Swift Fuels is working on another 100-octane unleaded fuel and reports that it should gain STC approval later this year. In addition, two fuels are showing progress through the PAFI program. The industry's clear goal is to find a drop-in 100-octane fuel that can be safely used by all piston powered aircraft in the GA fleet.

The FAA, and hundreds of industry stakeholders representing every corner of aviation and those that have a vested interest in this safe transition, have come together under the public-private EAGLE initiative (which stands for Eliminate Aviation Gasoline Lead Emissions). This partnership has one goal in mind: removing lead from all aviation fuel no later than 2030 and no matter from where that fuel(s) come from.

I serve as co-chair of the Eliminate Aviation Gasoline Lead Emissions (EAGLE) program, along with the FAA's executive director of aircraft certification, and we are laser focused on the goal of removing lead from aviation gasoline by 2030, hopefully sooner.

While these are very positive steps, a real threat to general aviation safety is being played out in Santa Clara County, California, with other locales looking closely at what is happening there.

Santa Clara County's action last year to prematurely ban the higher-octane fuel (100 low lead) that is required by thousands of general aviation aircraft to fly safely is simply irresponsible. Putting the wrong fuel in an aircraft can cause catastrophic engine failure – placing the pilot and those on the ground in danger.

Aircraft needing this higher-octane fuel include those flying missions of search and rescue, disaster relief and law enforcement. We understand that some of these important missions from Reid-Hillview in Santa Clara County have shelved, which is unfortunate news to local residents who rely on these services. In addition, there has already been one reported aircraft accident in Santa Clara County that has been directly attributed to misfuelling, primarily because the fuel needed to fly safely was not available.

AOPA and the general aviation community, including airports, fully supports removing lead from aviation gasoline. As we transition, we also need to ensure the safety of pilots and require airports to fulfill their AIP grant assurances by making 100LL available until a fleet wide solution is readily available. Airports accepting funds are legally bound to not discriminate against any class of aircraft at their airports, including the fuel they need to fly safely.

The unfortunate action by Santa Clara County, left unchecked, could have an unfortunate domino effect across the 5,000 public-use airports across this country, thereby posing significant consequences to general aviation in the United States. By working together, we can achieve our goal of removing lead from aviation gasoline and ensuring a safe and smart transition to get us there.

CONCLUSION:

We have an opportunity with this year's FAA Reauthorization to set the course for securing the future for general aviation. I would like to again thank the Subcommittee for this important hearing today. AOPA looks forward to working with the Committee on the upcoming FAA Reauthorization bill on the issues outlined today and others that impact pilots and aircraft owners.