



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, & TECHNOLOGY

Opening Statement

Chairwoman Kendra Horn (D-OK)
of the Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics

Space and Aeronautics Subcommittee Hearing:
R&D to Support Healthy Air Travel in the COVID-19 Era and Beyond

Tuesday, June 23, 2020

Good morning, and welcome to today's remote hearing on "R&D to Support Healthy Air Travel in the COVID-19 Era and Beyond." I'd like to welcome our witnesses and thank you for being here.

Commercial air travel is an essential part of the fabric of our society and economy. It plays a critical role in business, commerce, education, travel, and tourism. We take for granted that we can now easily travel vast distances by air and reach destinations that were once beyond imagination. In just over a century, air travel moved from our imagination to reality that has changed the way we interact with each other and connect with the world. Our dependence on air travel will only continue to grow. In 2018, the International Air Transport Association projected that global air travel will nearly double in 20 years, from 4 billion to more than 7 billion annual passengers.

As with many other industries, the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically impacted commercial air travel. In the U.S. alone, passenger air travel was down an estimated 96% in April 2020 from April 2019. Worldwide, the air travel industry is projected to lose more than \$300 billion in gross operating revenues this year. And the ripple effects of this shift extend well beyond airlines, to travel and tourism, business, supply chains and much more.

While Congress has provided financial support to the airline industry through loan guarantees, workforce support, and tax relief in the CARES Act, full recovery also requires ensuring safety and re-establishing public confidence as we continue to face the risks of COVID-19.

To that end, airlines are taking concrete and proactive steps to protect crew and passengers through increased cleaning, modified boarding procedures, and requiring the use of masks by passengers and crew. These are positive steps, but are they enough to ensure safety and re-establish trust? Additionally, with each airline determining its own approach, individuals are on their own about what is safe. That's a confusing place to be.

That's why today's discussion is so important. It's about understanding what we know, what we don't know, and what we need to know to reduce confusion and provide clear and science-based guidance on ensuring the safety of passengers and crew during this and any future pandemic. Because the silent threat of asymptomatic or presymptomatic individuals remains.

Federal public health agencies such as the CDC provide guidance and recommendations about precautions and actions to reduce the spread of COVID-19. However, agency roles and responsibilities for determining the risk of virus transmission on an aircraft and issuing guidance about specific mitigation measures are unclear. The FAA has conducted research on cabin air flow and aircraft environmental control systems in the cabin. What does that research tell us about mitigating any risks of COVID transmission?

And as a lifelong Girl Scout, I know the importance of being prepared. The threat of COVID-19 demands a national response. That's why we also need to examine the status of planning—for the Federal government, for the airlines, and for the traveling public—so that we and the industry aren't caught off guard with the threat of any future pandemics. Further, we need to examine our aeronautics and aviation R&D plans, the extent to which they include relevant research priorities and unique experience such as health care specialists and scientists to deal with mitigating the risks of novel viruses, and how that R&D can inform national plans.

In a June 16, 2020 article, the President of the National Academy of Sciences wrote about the coronavirus pandemic. She noted the need for “actionable science to inform rapid decision-making”, “strategic-science to inform long-term planning,” and “irreplaceable science to understand what works.” Today's conversation will consider what research has been done, what research needs to be done, and what further actions need to be taken to understand and mitigate the risks of virus transmission through air travel. I can't think of a better way to frame our discussion on R&D to help ensure the resiliency of our air travel system during the COVID-19 era and beyond.

Thank you.