

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

ORDER FOR RECESS

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate recess from 12:30 p.m. to 2:15 p.m.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

FAA REAUTHORIZATION BILL

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, I would yield the floor, but I don't see anyone else here.

I would like to comment on the FAA reauthorization bill. I had a couple of amendments to it, and I want to mention that both of my amendments have now been accepted. I feel very good about that. I think we are currently considering a bill that is very necessary to go ahead and get passed.

I again commend Senator THUNE and Senator NELSON for working yesterday to get through a number of important amendments that were approved by the Senate. Included in the group was an amendment I offered that would direct the FAA to establish rules to allow critical infrastructure owners and operators to use unmanned aircraft systems to carry out federally mandated patrols and to perform emergency response and preparation activities. This is one I feel very strongly about because there is a lot of controversy around drones, but we do know there are some things that have to be done—pipelines, for example. It is just as easy for a drone to do it, and it can be done in all kinds of weather.

This amendment would apply to energy infrastructure, such as oil and gas and renewable electric energy. It would apply to power utilities and telecommunications networks. It would apply to roads and bridges and water supply systems operators.

This amendment provides needed congressional direction to the FAA where there is a clear and articulable need, and I am glad it was accepted yesterday. I thank Senators BOOKER, HEITKAMP, WHITEHOUSE, MORAN, and KING for cosponsoring this amendment with me.

I want to turn to a provision that is in the base text of the FAA bill that is of particular importance to Oklahoma but impacts the entire aviation community—the commercial, military, and general aviators—and that is because it impacts air traffic controllers.

The FAA bill, which is the bill we are considering right now, includes a provision to encourage the hiring and retention of high-quality air traffic controller instructors. This is particularly important to me because the FAA Academy, which is where all the air traffic controllers are trained, is located in Oklahoma City. These instructors, who are required to have prior experience as air traffic controllers, are discouraged from working full time due to existing government regulations be-

cause they are former air traffic controllers. Without full-time instructors, we need four times as many part-time instructors to provide the needed instruction time to train for the next generation of controllers to manage the air traffic at our control towers, so that means the FAA must bear four times the cost of training new instructors. I am glad this bill will remove the government regulations that discourage full-time instructors. I thank my colleagues for working with me to address this problem.

Another one—and this is very significant. This is volunteer pilot protection. Last week I offered an amendment for consideration that supports volunteer pilots. This is a Good Samaritan law for pilots. Across the country, there are a lot of volunteer pilots. I myself have done this. I have been an active commercial pilot for 60 years. I can remember several times—once going down to an island just north of Caracas, Venezuela, that had been wiped out by a hurricane. I found 10 pilots to take down with me, medical supplies, food, and all of that.

During that time, if something had happened, even though he was a Good Samaritan—he was doing it at his own expense—he could have been sued for any number of exposures that are out there.

People are generous with their time and provide at no cost air transportation to someone in need of specialized medical treatment. We have done that before too. This amendment would provide those volunteer pilots limited liability protection as long as they follow appropriate procedures, as long as they have the required flight experience and maintain insurance. My amendment would not eliminate liability but would limit it in certain circumstances. Furthermore, volunteer pilots who do not meet all requirements or who are guilty of gross negligence or intentional misconduct don't have any protections. Furthermore, the pilots are required to maintain liability insurance to qualify for the protection.

In the 1997 Volunteer Protection Act, Congress recognized that the willingness of volunteers to offer their services is deterred by a potential for liability actions against them. I think that makes common sense. I think we all understand that. This amendment remains true to congressional intent and removes a disincentive that keeps pilots from volunteering to fly financially needy medical patients, humanitarian and charitable efforts, or other flights of compassion to save lives and to provide great benefit to the public.

Pilots are not going to get more reckless or choose to act more dangerously because they have liability protection. Pilots are already at risk, and they are a risk-adverse group because every time they fly, they take their own life in their hands—regardless of why they are flying. These pilots are acting out of the goodness of their hearts and willingness to help.

Fortunately, accidents are infrequent, and anecdotally I am told that in the past 10 to 15 years, there have been perhaps five or six lawsuits involving volunteer pilots and volunteer pilot organizations. So the problem isn't that that is actually going to happen, but it is the fact that there is a deterrent there to discourage people from doing what they want to do, what a Good Samaritan does. The volunteer pilot organizations that work to coordinate volunteer pilots do not need to maintain databases of lawsuits and the results of lawsuits precisely because they are so infrequent. If there were a lot of accidents and resulting law suits, I think it is fair to say the FAA, NTSB, and volunteer pilot organizations themselves would be investigating whether volunteer pilot activity was a safe activity to begin with.

The larger concern for volunteer pilot organizations is that pilots will not volunteer for fear of being involved in a lawsuit, which would then prevent a needy service from being provided. So it is more about what the lawyers say the potential could be, and that has a direct impact on recruitment for volunteer pilots. Looking ahead, if a pilot were ever successfully sued and his or her assets were at risk, it would be too late to act to prevent a mass exodus of volunteer pilots.

This amendment is about making sure there continues to be volunteers who are willing to provide much-needed assistance. The amendment is not agreed to yet, but it recognizes the value of volunteer pilots and their contribution to the public good. I urge my colleagues to be supportive of this effort.

In conclusion, I thank Senator THUNE for his leadership, as well as Senator NELSON, for bringing this bill to the floor. I look forward to a robust amendment process.

In fact, I encourage anyone who has an amendment to come down, present his amendment, and talk about it. One of the problems we had during the highway bill was not being able to get Members to bring their amendments down, and it ended up delaying the bill for several weeks, which was totally unnecessary. I also encourage the House to take up and pass this bill.

With that, I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. FLAKE). The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Ms. HIRONO. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

(The remarks of Ms. HIRONO pertaining to the introduction of S. 2784 are printed in today's RECORD under "Statements on Introduced Bills and Joint Resolutions.")

Ms. HIRONO. I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The assistant Democratic leader.