



COMMITTEE ON
SCIENCE, SPACE, AND TECHNOLOGY
REPUBLICANS Frank Lucas, Ranking Member

Opening Statement of Space & Aeronautics Subcommittee Ranking Member Brian Babin

Space & Aeronautics Subcommittee Hearing

R&D to Support Healthy Air Travel in the COVID-19 Era and Beyond

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The COVID-19 pandemic has touched virtually every aspect of our lives. Families are self-isolating and limiting in-person contact with friends and family. Many workplaces have fundamentally restructured in response to the virus. Our economy and employment levels are challenged as we attempt to protect public health.

While industries like restaurants and entertainment were asked to sacrifice profits and solvency for the greater good, other sectors like health care and grocers were asked to accept greater risks. The aerospace industry was asked to span these two different paradigms. On the one hand, air travel was significantly curtailed in order to prevent the spread of the disease. On the other hand, transportation, including air travel, is considered an essential function in our society. This places passengers, airlines, and the country in the precarious position of continuing operations in the face of not only health risks, but also risks to the overall viability of the companies who are operating at a fraction of their normal operating capacity.

According to [recent press reports](#), airlines are operating at between 15 and 17 percent capacity compared to last year. At the same time, private jet flights have surged 70 percent, but this doesn't do anything to help most Americans. [Polling](#) done recently by the International Air Transportation Association indicated that only 45 percent of the population was willing to fly within one or two months of restrictions being lifted. This does not bode well for an industry that our nation depends upon so heavily.

For this reason, it is crucial to understand the health risks posed by airline travel as accurately as possible. Research into how the virus propagates in an aircraft cabin via airborne or surface transmission is the start. Characterizing that environment will then allow airlines, aircraft manufacturers, airports, government agencies, and the public to develop technologies and processes to mitigate those risks. HEPA filters, ultraviolet lights, antimicrobial surface coating and treatments, increased cleaning protocols, passenger screenings, masks, social distancing, and limited movement in the cabin for restroom access and service carts are all options being considered.

But all of these options are traded against other considerations such as power, weight, maintenance, cabin pressure, comfort, certification, and cost. They must also demonstrate efficacy. At the end of the day, the best way to stay safe is to stay home. Any option to fly comes with some element of risk. One could make the argument that the risk of driving to and from the airport, walking through the airport, and traveling on buses and tram cars are far riskier than the actual flight. This may not be true, depending on whether you have a preexisting condition or are a member of a vulnerable population. Still, it does illustrate that the aircraft is just one of the elements that we have to address.

It is the responsibility of our agencies, our legislature, our industry, and our public to find the right balance of risk. That balance may change as time goes by. Strict controls put in place initially to “flatten the curve” may not be appropriate in the long term. Conversely, controls may need to be reinstated over time if new information is presented. Science will characterize and inform these risks and decisions. While other factors will undoubtedly play a role in final decisions, understanding the air travel environment is the first step. This will require an assessment of a variety of disciplines such as computational fluid dynamics, statistics and modeling, epidemiology, sociology and psychology, chemistry, biology, and many more. This is certainly not an easy task, but it is not unachievable.

It is often said that these are unprecedented times, but we have faced similar health challenges before. I am confident we can come through this stronger and more resilient than ever. The aerospace industry and our scientific, technical, and health care systems are second-to-none.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today and yield back.

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