

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 29, 2017

Elaine Chao
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

Michael Huerta
Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20591

Dear Secretary Chao and Administrator Huerta:

We are writing to strongly encourage the Department of Transportation (DOT) and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to support an adequate budget for rural air service. The Eastern Oregon Regional Airport in Pendleton is an example of an economic engine that is efficiently using federal programs to improve and expand operations. This is a rural community, still working to recover from the recession, and the need for infrastructure is only growing. Please know that we will also advocate in Congress for funding to support air service investments in rural communities.

The Eastern Oregon Regional Airport is a recipient of the Essential Air Service (EAS) program funding, the only EAS airport in Oregon. Without this service, Eastern Oregon lacks any commercial air service, putting these communities at a serious competitive disadvantage when working to attract or retain business. Air service is also a safety and health care concern. Many rural seniors travel for specialty health care, and the flights to Portland create opportunity for them to remain in their homes and communities and still access the care they need. The airport has been quite responsive and in recent months, contracted with a new provider to improve enplanements and ensure that federal investments are well spent.

Another important federal investment is the Contract Tower Program. Having funding for Contract Towers is crucial to supporting commercial air service at Pendleton, but also has another important benefit. The Eastern Oregon Regional Airport and the City of Pendleton understood some years ago that in order to maintain service, they have to innovate. The airport and surrounding countryside made application and became part of the Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) Pan-Pacific Test Range. The state of Oregon has invested in airport infrastructure, and the airport is beginning to forecast significant revenues, not only for the airport and test range, but also for the city which is hosting UAS companies and events.

The Contract Tower program has averaged around 10,000 operations per year in Pendleton, but is forecast to see around 50,000 operations because of the increased traffic due to UAS operations. UAS vehicles have significant future applications: agriculture, business, package delivery, and search and rescue, and Pendleton offers a safe site to research and test both UAS vehicle innovations as well as integration into the airspace.

Again, we appreciate your support and attention for these significant federal programs that support economic revitalization and stability in rural areas.

Sincerely,



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator