U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Washington, DC 20515

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January 30, 2003

President George W. Bush
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

It has come to our attention that the Office of Management and Budget is placing air traffic controllers who work for the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) on its 2002 Commercial Activities list, which is an inventory of activities performed by government personnel that should be subject to the forces of competition. We find this action very disturbing, as it appears to be an initial step towards privatizing our nation's air traffic control (ATC) system.

We have known for quite some time that the FAA runs the best ATC system in the world, a system that moves over 600 million passengers a year with a high degree of safety and efficiency. On September 11th, we learned just how efficiently our air traffic controllers do their job. On that fateful day, at 9:45 a.m., the Department of Transportation gave the order to ground all aircraft in U.S. airspace immediately – an operation that controllers had neither been trained nor tested to accomplish. Within the space of two hours, the FAA's air traffic controllers safely landed 4,482 aircraft – 3,195 commercial, 1,122 general aviation, and 165 military -- without one operational error. The dedication and professionalism of these highly skilled government employees is unparalleled.

Operation of ATC requires the cooperative, coordinated efforts of many divisions in FAA including those responsible for ATC services, facilities and equipment, safety certification and regulation, airport development, research and development and law. All of these divisions are required by law to have safety as their highest priority.

In the existing ATC system, the FAA and the Congress make decisions on safety issues in the overall best public interest, with input from system users. If there is any move towards privatization or some form of government corporation, how will the public be assured that ATC operations will be managed with a primary goal of protecting the interest of airline passengers and ensuring safety and security?

One of the main justifications advanced in support of privatization or a government corporation is that it would produce a system that is more responsive to airline concerns and would reduce airline costs.

However, two of the most prominent countries that have privatized their ATC systems -- Great Britain and Canada – have had numerous problems. Both countries' systems are financially distressed and suffering from performance setbacks. The perceived gains by privatizing the ATC systems in these countries – lower fees and increased efficiency -- have actually translated into higher fees, numerous flight cancellations and delays. This is not a model that the U.S. wants to emulate.

Accordingly, we ask that you reconsider your decision to place our nation's air traffic controllers on the 2002 Commercial Activities list. Our air traffic controllers clearly perform an inherently governmental function -- their jobs should not be listed as a commercial activity.

Sincerely,

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