

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 8, 2020

The Honorable Elaine Chao
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
Washington, D.C. 20590

The Honorable Chad F. Wolf
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Secretaries Chao and Wolf:

The COVID-19 pandemic has devastated the U.S. aviation industry. Establishing the health, safety, and security standards necessary to restore public confidence in travel will require significant coordination and collaboration. In the absence of coordinated Federal leadership, a patchwork of standards and requirements have emerged throughout the aviation sector to respond to COVID-19. We commend frontline workers and industry stakeholders for doing what they can to respond to the changing environment during this pandemic, but coordinated Federal leadership is essential to get this right. As such, we call on you to establish an interagency working group to develop robust, coordinated plans to address COVID-19 in aviation operations.

We are all cognizant of the overwhelming effect this pandemic has had on the aviation industry. Although passenger volume has dramatically decreased, frontline employees are still going to work and aircraft are still flying. Right now, some airports and airlines are requiring passengers to wear masks or face coverings, and some employers are requiring employee temperature checks. However, frontline workers and airline passengers, subject to varying requirements, continue to congregate in public areas, secure areas, and finally on aircraft. Inconsistency creates uncertainty and limits the effectiveness of the actions taken.

As states and localities begin to lift stay-at-home orders and look to phase-in a return to public life, the Departments of Transportation (DOT) and Homeland Security (DHS), as the Co-Sector-Specific Agencies for the Transportation Systems Sector, must provide leadership in developing a path forward for the aviation sector. In particular, the Federal Aviation Administration, Transportation Security Administration, and U.S. Customs and Border Protection, in collaboration with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, must stand up an interagency working group charged with developing coordinated plans that are the result of intensive coordination and consultation with not only domestic and foreign industry stakeholders but also labor groups.

The interagency working group must be prepared and empowered to study and develop necessary plans, guidelines, and recommended requirements that focus on:

- Safe and secure air travel in light of the COVID-19 pandemic that includes planning for potential seasonal recurrences of this or other coronaviruses;
- Personal protective equipment for aviation workers, including requirements for wearing face masks, cleaning and disinfecting aircraft, airports, equipment, and other enclosed facilities, and providing for social distancing for passengers, flight crews, and other airport workers;
- Protocols for queuing, security screening, and other points of interface among passengers and personnel at the airport;
- Aircraft boarding and deplaning procedures;
- In-flight passenger and flight crew seating arrangements and other in-flight services and operations;
- Baggage handling and claim procedures including, possibly, restricting the number of non-passengers able to access baggage areas;
- Privacy and civil liberty implications of passenger health screenings, contact-tracing, or any other process for monitoring the health of passengers and workers, as well as concerns regarding the effectiveness of such measures given the asymptomatic spread of COVID-19; and
- Operating procedures to manage future public health crises affecting air travel.

For the working group to be successful, it is critical that it work in close coordination and consultation with domestic and international industry stakeholders, including airport operators, airlines, aircraft manufacturers, labor organizations representing aviation industry workers (including those representing DHS, DOT, and other government employees, pilots, flight attendants, maintenance workers, safety inspectors, ticket and gate agents, and concessionaires), public health experts, consumer and passenger rights organizations, privacy and civil liberty organizations, manufacturers of passenger screening technologies, foreign governmental counterparts, and relevant international bodies and associations, including the International Civil Aviation Organization.

As the aviation sector begins to restore operations, a sustained and meaningful partnership with all participants in this industry will ensure measures developed by the working group are effectively implemented to protect frontline workers and passengers and aid the recovery and success of this sector. We have an enormous task ahead of us, and we will only succeed if we all work together.

Please provide to our Committees your feedback on this proposal and information regarding your plans to establish an interagency working group. Once the working group has been established, we request that you provide regular briefings for Members and staff of our Committees regarding its work. Thank you for your prompt attention to this serious matter.

Sincerely,



BENNIE G. THOMPSON
Chairman
Committee on Homeland Security



PETER DEFAZIO
Chairman
Committee on Transportation and
Infrastructure



J. LUIS CORREA
Chairman
Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Transportation and
Maritime Security



RICK LARSEN
Chair
Committee on Transportation and
Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Aviation



KATHLEEN RICE
Chairwoman
Committee on Homeland Security
Subcommittee on Border Security,
Facilitation, and Operations