

Statement of Rep. Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS)
Ranking Member, Committee on Homeland Security

In Support of H.R. 1447, the Aviation Security Stakeholder Participation Act of 2011

June 26, 2012

Effective coordination between stakeholders and their regulators is critical to the implementation of policies that work. To that end, we have the responsibility to ensure that policy is informed by the realities on the ground.

Arguably, nowhere is the need for policy coordination more important than at our Nation's airports. Given that the aviation sector remains an attractive target for terrorists, the difference between a security policy that works and one that does not can be all that stands between life and death.

That is why I introduced H.R. 1447, the "Aviation Security Stakeholder Participation Act." This legislation will ensure that the voices of those subject to policies and protocols put in place by TSA are heard and their recommendations are considered.

It does so by directing the TSA to establish an Aviation Security Advisory Committee. For years, such an advisory committee existed and worked effectively with TSA on matters such as aviation security methods, equipment, and procedures. For instance, in 2003, the ASAC's cargo working group, which included the Cargo Airline Association, made recommendations that formed the basis of TSA's program for 100% screening of air cargo.

Unfortunately, during the last Administration, the charter for this advisory committee was allowed to lapse and the committee ceased operations. While I am pleased that, in response to my bill, the Obama Administration re-established this committee on its own authority, I strongly believe that it is crucial that the Aviation Security Advisory Committee be codified in law to ensure that TSA aviation security policy continues to be informed by the private sector.

That is why my bill would, for the first time, establish the Aviation Security Advisory Committee in statute and require that representatives from up to 27 member organizations participate. I introduced H.R. 1447 in April of 2011, with the Ranking Member of the Transportation Security Subcommittee of the Committee on Homeland Security-- Representative Jackson Lee. It was favorably reported, on a bipartisan basis, in November 2011.

TSA has the responsibility to secure the American public from threats posed to our transportation sector. However, it cannot do so in a vacuum. TSA must leverage technical and operational expertise from our Nation's airports to deliver a collaborative and robust security system across our aviation sector.

Strong partnerships with aviation stakeholders are critical to informing aviation security policy. Just last month, the Committee received testimony from the Airport Minority Advisory Council about arbitrary limitations set forth by TSA on the issuance of airport worker badges to airport-based small businesses—like newsstands and coffee and souvenir shops.

Since then, TSA has committed to re-evaluate the policy and work with the private sector to address the concerns raised. This is just one example of how a TSA policy-- developed without input from the advisory committee-- was not informed by economic realities.

Now, TSA is in the position of having to revisit this and other ill-informed policies to ensure that they enhance security in a manner that does not unduly burden the private sector.

My bill also directs the Administrator of TSA to establish three targeted working groups to address the unique homeland security challenges related to air cargo security, general aviation security, and perimeter security.

All of us have a stake in ensuring the security of our Nation, let us pass this bill so that the stakeholders who are expected to comply with the policies and procedures developed by TSA have a seat at the table. That way, we can be confident that TSA policies are both effective from a security standpoint and address the economic and commercial realities of our Nation's airports.

As this bill has made its way to the House Floor, the Chairman and I have been engaged in ongoing dialogue over how to strike the right balance on who should be represented on the Aviation Security Advisory Committee. I am dedicated to ensuring that the voices of passengers and small and minority-owned businesses impacted by TSA's policies, procedures and regulations are heard. It is important that persons representing those groups have a seat at the table when TSA makes decisions that affect both passengers rights and businesses bottom lines.

I would yield to Chairman for his assurance that as this bill continues its movement through the legislative process; he will work with me to ensure these important populations are included in this Aviation Security Advisory Committee legislation. I thank the gentleman for his commitment.

I would like to express my gratitude to all the Members of the Committee on Homeland Security for their unanimous support of this legislation when it was considered by the Committee last September.

While the Committee on Homeland Security has not been as active on the legislative front as I had hoped it would be this Congress, I am pleased that several discrete bills, introduced by both Democrats and Republicans, have received bipartisan support on the House Floor during the last month.