

Aerial Surveying and Remote Sensing Issues in the Aviation Reauthorization Bill

House Transportation & Infrastructure Chairman James Oberstar (D-MN) has introduced H.R. 915, the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2009. A Senate version is expected to be introduced later this Congress.

The collection of aerial photographs and other remote sensing data by fixed wing aircraft and helicopter platforms is essential to the economy of the United States. Every day, aerial survey missions collect data to support hundreds of critical programs and applications from emergency response to E-911 systems, from highway projects to private development, from energy production and distribution to environmental management and land use planning. Firms engaged in aerial surveying, photogrammetry, satellite and airborne remote sensing, aerial photography, and aerial and satellite image processing serve government clients at the federal, state and local levels, as well as the commercial sector. Many of these firms operate general aviation aircraft to carry their airborne sensors. While MAPPS supports many of the provisions in the previously enacted Airports and Aviation authorization legislation (P.L. 108-176), concerns remain that this year's bill may negatively impact and even cripple activity in some of the market segments served by MAPPS members. MAPPS seeks a balance between safety and business concerns in the FAA and TSA airspace program.

MAPPS opposes the exclusive use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for aerial surveillance and photography and remote sensing by Federal agencies within the borders of the United States. Exclusive government development and use of UAVs presents two potential negative impacts. First, it results in unfair government competition with the private satellite and aerial surveying profession. Second, it results in large areas of restricted airspace into which entry by private manned survey aircraft is impaired. MAPPS urges Congress to transition the use of UAVs within the U.S. airspace from solely government agencies to the private sector.

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) has made improvements in the waiver process for allowing aerial survey operations in the Washington DC Flight Restricted Zone (FRZ). However, the current waiver process and planned procedures continue to result in unnecessary delays. Most survey flights into the FRZ are for time-critical and essential government projects, and flown by private aerial survey firms and crews with a history of prior waiver approvals. Geospatial firms routinely request and receive waivers through TSA to access restricted airspace for the purpose of conducting mapping operations, much of which is critical to this nation's infrastructure. As of March 18, 2000, geospatial firms can no longer apply for waivers to access restricted airspace over the Disney theme parks, even though they can, and do, receive waivers to conduct vital mapping operations in nearly all other restricted, and in some cases, highly sensitive airspace. MAPPS urges Congress to return to the pre-March 18, 2000 waiver application procedure allowing geospatial firms to apply for waivers through TSA to access Disney and other restricted airspace.

The process for obtaining approvals for modifications to aerial survey aircraft is slow and is not consistently recognized among various Flight Standards District Offices (FSDOs). MAPPS urges Congress to require FAA to promulgate a single, consistent set of aircraft modification standards for aerial survey instrument installation and modification.

Possible user fees for general aviation aircraft operations have been proposed by the FAA and the Bush Administration, ostensibly to help avert a "funding crisis" that some in the FAA and the administration claim will exist if the funding system is not changed. MAPPS questions the logic of changing the present system that works well, and opposes placing an additional financial burden on a recovering general aviation economic base.

ACTION REQUESTED:

MAPPS respectfully urges members of Congress to include favorable MAPPS supported measures in the 2009 Airports and Aviation Reauthorization bill that will enhance the ability of geospatial firms within this critically important profession to operate safely and efficiently in the Nation's airspace. For more information, please contact John Byrd, MAPPS Government Affairs Manager, at jbyrd@mapps.org or (703) 787-6996.