2204 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515–0530
(202) 225–3976
www.house.gov/waxman

District Office:
8436 West Third Street
Suite 600
Los Angeles, CA 90048–4183
(323) 651–1040
(818) 878–7400
(310) 652–3095

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515–0530

HENRY A. WAXMAN
30th District, California

Chairman
Committee on Oversight
and Government Reform

Member
Committee on
Energy and Commerce

May 22, 2007

Marion C. Blakey
Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, D.C. 20591-0001

Dear Administrator Blakey:

I am writing to express my concern with the FAA's failure to act constructively on the serious need for safety upgrades at Santa Monica Airport.

Santa Monica Airport (SMO) is one of the most heavily used single runway airports in the United States. Its unique layout presents significant safety risks to airport users and the surrounding community. Approximately 75% of the airport is surrounded by residences, with some homes located as close as 250 feet from the runway. Both ends of the runway are lined with houses, buffered only by abrupt hill slopes and public streets. The 5,000-foot runway was built decades ago with no runway safety areas (RSAs) and the safety risks have been compounded by the changing fleet mix and increased frequency at the airport by larger business jets.

Since 2000, I have contacted the FAA on numerous occasions to convey the urgent need for the FAA to work with the City of Santa Monica, which operates SMO, to address the need for the installation of RSAs at both ends of the airport. Despite ongoing discussions between the FAA personnel and City staff from 2003 to 2006, it appears that the FAA remains unwilling to engage in a full-faith effort to address runway safety inadequacies at SMO.

Most recently, during a March 26, 2007 meeting of the Santa Monica Airport Commission, an FAA representative delivered a statement abruptly retreating from an RSA concept plan developed by the FAA and the City. The statement conveyed the FAA's preliminary conclusion that a 165-foot Engineered Materials Arresting System (EMAS) bed rather than the 250-foot EMAS bed discussed in the concept plan would be appropriate for the more heavily used west end of the runway. The preliminary decision also abandoned the original concept plan's proposal for a 600-foot RSA on the east end of the runway in favor of an unspecified shorter RSA. This drastic unilateral change sharply undercut previous discussions on the issue and took place without any opportunity for public comment or for review and input from the City.

The FAA has conveyed that it reached this preliminary conclusion on the basis of comments from aircraft operators during a December 12, 2006 meeting held at their Western Pacific Regional Headquarters. While some comments from aviation users indicated that adoption of the original concept plan could restrict some aircraft from operating at SMO, I understand the majority recognized that most aircraft would still be able to continue operating albeit at reduced weights and shorter operating distances.

The FAA's move to alter the concept proposal before other stakeholders were given the opportunity to comment has created a troubling perception that the FAA is favoring access and convenience for aviation users at the expense of safety.

It is my understanding that the new FAA proposal would drastically reduce the effectiveness of the RSAs as compared to the original concept plan presented to the airport users. Instead of a 250-foot EMAS bed capable of stopping a Gulfstream IV exiting the runway at 70 knots, the FAA's proposed design would only stop the same aircraft exiting the runway at 40 to 45 knots. Additionally, it appears that the new "substitute" proposal does not meet the FAA's design guidelines for the airport. SMO's Airport Reference Code of B-II requires a minimum of 300' of safety area at both ends of the runway.

SMO is frequented by over 9,000 Category C and D aircraft operations per year. FAA design guidelines specify a 1,000-foot runway safety area for these types of aircraft operations. While many in the community have questions about whether the original RSA concept plan would be sufficient to address safety risks in the event of an accident involving a C or D aircraft, the FAA's preliminary conclusion appears to be entirely inadequate. These concerns are heightened by the fact that the new proposal fails to specifically address remediation for the east end of the runway, which is more commonly used in the event of poor visibility or difficult weather conditions.

The FAA must stop dragging its feet. The introduction of adequate and equivalent RSA enhancements at both ends of the runway that address the safety requirements of the aircraft using the airport is absolutely essential and long overdue. I call on the FAA to abandon its preliminary judgment and engage in a good-faith process that includes input on the original concept plan from all stakeholders in both the aviation and non-aviation public. Retreating to a less safe RSA solution makes no sense at all. Most importantly, I urge the FAA to undertake a decision-making process that puts safety first.

Sincerely,

HENRY A. WAXMAN
Member of Congress