Chairman Cruz, Ranking Member Sinema, and members of the Senate Commerce Subcommittee on Aviation and Space, the Helicopter Association International (HAI) thanks you for holding this hearing to examine the US air traffic control (ATC) system.

For 70 years, HAI has been the trade association for the international helicopter industry. HAI members represent 3,000 aviation businesses and individuals from more than 73 nations who operate more than 4,500 helicopters approximately 2.3 million hours each year. HAI is dedicated to supporting the safety of every flight, to promoting the helicopter as an effective business tool, and to keeping our members’ rotors turning. Our member companies and individuals span the industry, from manned and unmanned operators, to pilots, mechanics, manufacturers, and suppliers of goods and services.

HAI’s focus is on creating a culture that makes safety the first priority for everyone in our industry, with a vision of “Zero Accidents.” Over my many years in the industry, I have seen tremendous growth and change, and today’s commitment to safety is the highest I have ever seen in the helicopter community.

I have been involved in aviation for more than 50 years, both helicopter and fixed-wing, military and civilian. During that time, I have not experienced a more exciting watershed moment than now, as we employ new technology and integrate new aircraft into the National Airspace System (NAS).

Despite the challenges posed by this transformative change, our airspace is safer than ever. According to the FAA, on average more than 44,000 aircraft are efficiently guided to a safe landing each day. This remarkable level of safety is accomplished in part through the US ATC system.

As we in the helicopter industry complete our various missions, we rely heavily on the ATC system to help us maintain safety for ourselves, our passengers, and those on the ground. ATC provides situational awareness and a larger margin of safety than what an individual pilot in command could otherwise provide.
The US ATC system is designed to offer access to the NAS to all users who comply with the Federal Aviation Regulations, and all users pay for ATC services through an aviation fuel tax. Pilots who find themselves in a potentially hazardous situation can reach out to ATC for assistance without incurring additional charges — which is not always the case in other countries. Providing equal access to ATC services is a critical component to the safety and success of our NAS, demonstrating that we truly make safety our top priority.

As new aircraft are integrated into the NAS, providing equal access takes on increased importance. This integration is occurring as we speak, but the concept is not new. We’ve been integrating numerous aircraft categories into the airspace since aviation began. At one point, jets were new. Helicopters were new. Yet these aircraft were safety integrated into the NAS. We do not need to reinvent the wheel. Some believe the easiest and quickest way to integrate UAS into the NAS is by excluding manned aircraft from certain segments of existing airspace. HAI believes that describes segregation, not integration.

The integration of aircraft, not segregation of airspace, is the correct path forward. The NAS is a national resource and one that should be open to all who operate in compliance with FAA regulations. Current airspace users should never be excluded from airspace that they currently have access to. Segregation of the airspace with associated restrictions and prohibitions being placed discriminatorily on certain aircraft categories runs counter to our safety priorities and is an initiative HAI and its members do not support.

One important element of safety in the NAS comes from standardization of aviation regulations — and therefore operational processes and procedures — through federal preemption of aviation regulation, designating the FAA as the sole regulatory authority over US aviation. This clearly defined FAA authority has created an operating environment for US aviation that provides a system of safety for all operators of all categories of aircraft.

Our industry’s first and foremost concern is for safety, which is as it should be. The principle of federal airspace preemption allows for one national regulatory authority, staffed by professional subject matter experts, to oversee the NAS with a common set of rules and laws understood by all operators, either manned or unmanned.

While the US aviation regulatory system is the global gold standard, there is of course room for improvement. The FAA’s NextGen Program is designed to provide important safety advances and efficiencies to the ATC system that will benefit all segments of the aviation community. However, the FAA can work more closely with the helicopter industry to avoid missed opportunities. For example, in order to boost adoption by the general aviation community of one NextGen element, ADS-B, the FAA issued rebates that were only available to fixed-wing aircraft. Improved communications among all stakeholders will help advance the NextGen Program.

The FAA continues to make progress in the implementation of NextGen as several key technologies are either fully deployed or progressing toward full deployment. These achievements are due to the skilled work of FAA employees who build, operate, maintain, and manage the NAS. Accelerating investment in NextGen as part of any infrastructure package will
expedite the benefits for all users of the system, including general aviation, commercial airlines, and consumers.

Meanwhile, the helicopter industry has already embraced, implemented, and benefited from the initial phase of the new technology put in place by the FAA. HAI was one of the industry partners that worked with the FAA to implement a successful rollout of ADS-B technology in the Gulf of Mexico that went online in 2010, substantially improving safety and efficiency in that airspace. This partnership between the FAA and the helicopter industry has been a shining example of industry and government working together for the benefit of all.

As the FAA continues to modernize the ATC system, it is imperative that the interests of all NAS users have a voice through the regulatory process of the FAA as well as congressional oversight. The current structure of the ATC system has been demonstrated to provide an appropriate level of safety for all users, including the helicopter industry, in an airspace system that is the busiest, most complex, and safest in the world. Why would we want to change it?

HAI believes that any efforts to remove the ATC function from congressional and FAA oversight represents a serious threat to general aviation and its safety. We oppose this unnecessary change to an essential component of safety assurance for the NAS.

HAI thanks the committee for the opportunity to submit testimony for the record on the US air traffic control system. Our members applaud the committee’s leadership and steadfast commitment to making improvements that will benefit all users of the NAS. HAI is committed to working with Congress and the administration in crafting common-sense policies aimed at implementing NextGen technology in an efficient, cost-effective manner.