Opening Statement of
The Honorable Tom Feeney
Before the Space and Aeronautics Subcommittee Hearing on
NASA's Aeronautics R&D Program: Status and Issues
May 1, 2008

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for calling this morning's hearing. And my thanks, too, to our witnesses for taking time away from their busy schedules to appear before us today. I realize most of you have traveled some distance, carving at least a day – if not two – out of your work week to be here. Your wisdom and expertise are greatly appreciated.

Mr. Chairman, there are very few federal enterprises over the past one hundred years that have contributed so powerfully to America's economy and enhanced our nation's quality of life – and our security – than NASA's aeronautics research and development program. It began 93 years ago with the establishment of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics (NACA) in 1915. Even though the Wright brothers conducted the first powered flight in 1903, by the beginning of World War I, the United States lagged behind Europe in airplane technology. In order to catch up, Congress founded NACA.

NACA evolved into a splendid organization that produced gems of aeronautical research. In 1958, NACA was folded into NASA when the latter was created in response to Sputnik. Exemplary aeronautical research continued. And the Space Task Force, which drew from the talent based at NACA's Langley Memorial Aeronautical Laboratory, began America's human spaceflight program – Project Mercury.

The discoveries and applications that have flowed from NACA and NASA have spurred a large and vibrant aerospace industry.

As should be expected, this industry and aerospace technology has evolved over time, especially over the last three decades. Since the late 1970s, the airline industry has been deregulated; manufacturers and carriers have consolidated; the airspace has become saturated; building new runways and airports has become very difficult and expensive; the size and performance of aircraft operating in the system are much more diverse; and environmental performance and efficiency are driving designs of the next generation of aircraft. The list goes on.

In the face of these changes, it's fair to ask how healthy and relevant is NASA's aeronautics program today? Is it appropriate for the federal government to continue to fund aeronautics research, and if so, where should the line be drawn between government and industry research responsibilities? Are NASA's aeronautics researchers pursuing the right questions? Is the agency making the most effective use of its research funding? Are the agency's discoveries and products being adopted by industry?

Adding further complexity to the debate is the NextGen program, of which NASA is a critical partner. Unlike the mixed results from past efforts to modernize the air traffic

control system, NextGen must succeed. In the increasingly competitive global economy, America's advantages in mobility and logistics cannot be frittered away.

And in an era of increased emphasis on energy and environmental concerns, I gently point out that NextGen's efficiencies will produce energy savings and a lessened environmental footprint as aircraft use more direct routings, experience less air and ground holds, and employ techniques like Continuous Descent Approach. Improved mobility is environmentally friendly and economically beneficial.

But if NextGen is to succeed, NASA must develop and validate technologies to enable more efficient, environmentally benign, and safer aircraft and engines, as well as surveillance, navigation and control infrastructure.

I am hopeful the testimony we'll receive this morning will help us reach broad consensus on how to shape the program to meet future challenges. I am especially anxious to hear the views of industry, and from the National Research Council about their findings and recommendations contained in their recently published analysis of NASA's aeronautics program. I also want to congratulate Dr. Jaiwon Shin, a longtime NASA aeronautics researcher, who was recently appointed to head the agency's aeronautics directorate.

Aeronautics is not a mature industry. Any number of new technologies that enable cleaner, quieter, more fuel efficient aircraft will make a telling difference between success and failure. We cannot afford to cede our leadership to foreign suppliers.