

**ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE**  
**HOUSE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE**

April 25, 2024

9:00 a.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT**

Representative CJ McCormick, Chair  
Representative Kevin McCabe, Vice Chair  
Representative Tom McKay  
Representative Thomas Baker  
Representative Rebecca Himschoot  
Representative Donna Mears

**MEMBERS ABSENT**

Representative Justin Ruffridge

**OTHER REPRESENTATIVES PRESENT**

Representative Andrew Gray

**COMMITTEE CALENDAR**

CS FOR SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 20 (CRA)  
Urging the United States Congress to address outages of  
Automated Weather Observing System stations and Automated  
Surface Observing System stations occurring in the state.

- MOVED CSSJR 20 (CRA) OUT OF COMMITTEE

**PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION**

BILL: SJR 20

SHORT TITLE: WEATHER OBSERVING SYSTEM STATION OUTAGES

SPONSOR(s): COMMUNITY & REGIONAL AFFAIRS

04/03/24	(S)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
04/03/24	(S)	CRA
04/09/24	(S)	CRA AT 1:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
04/09/24	(S)	Heard & Held
04/09/24	(S)	MINUTE (CRA)
04/16/24	(S)	CRA AT 1:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
04/16/24	(S)	Moved CSSJR 20 (CRA) Out of Committee
04/16/24	(S)	MINUTE (CRA)
04/19/24	(S)	CRA RPT CS 4DP SAME TITLE

04/19/24 (S) DP: DUNBAR, GRAY-JACKSON, GIESSEL,  
BJORKMAN  
04/22/24 (S) TRANSMITTED TO (H)  
04/22/24 (S) VERSION: CSSJR 20(CRA)  
04/24/24 (H) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS  
04/24/24 (H) CRA  
04/24/24 (H) CRA WAIVED PUBLIC HEARING NOTICE, RULE  
23  
04/25/24 (H) CRA AT 8:00 AM BARNES 124

**WITNESS REGISTER**

SENATOR FORREST DUNBAR  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** As prime sponsor, introduced CSSJR 20(CRA) to the committee.

SENATOR SHELLEY HUGHES  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified during the hearing on CSSJR 20(CRA).

MIKE JONES, Economics Professor  
University of Alaska  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Gave invited testimony during the hearing on CSSJR 20(CRA).

WILL DAY, Executive Director,  
Alaska Air Carrier's Association  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Gave invited testimony during the hearing on CSSJR 20(CRA).

DON OWEN  
Alaska Air Pilots  
Anchorage, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Answered questions during the hearing on CSSJR 20(CRA).

REPRESENTATIVE ANDREW GRAY  
Alaska State Legislature  
Juneau, Alaska

**POSITION STATEMENT:** Testified in support of CSSJR 20(CRA).

## **ACTION NARRATIVE**

[9:00:38 AM](#)

CHAIR MCCORMICK called the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 9:00 a.m. Representatives McKay, Baker, Mears, and McCormick were present at the call to order. Representatives Himschoot and McCabe arrived as the meeting was in progress.

### **SJR 20-WEATHER OBSERVING SYSTEM STATION OUTAGES**

[9:01:23 AM](#)

CHAIR MCCORMICK announced that the only order of business would be CS FOR SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 20(CRA), Urging the United States Congress to address outages of Automated Weather Observing System stations and Automated Surface Observing System stations occurring in the state.

[9:01:56 AM](#)

SENATOR FORREST DUNBAR, Alaska State Legislature, as prime sponsor, introduced CSSJR 20(CRA) to the committee. He began by explaining the Automated Weather Observation System (AWOS) and how it is unique to Alaska. He said about 59 percent of AWOS stations around Alaska have reported full outages and 77 percent have reported partial outages yearly for the past several years. He said that CSSJR 20(CRA) would ask Alaska's federal delegation and Congress more broadly to reauthorize certain federal departments to fix the AWOS systems for the long term.

[9:04:01 AM](#)

SENATOR SHELLEY HUGHES, Alaska State Legislature, began her remarks by confessing that she didn't know what AWOS was until she was made aware of it while sitting on the food security task force. She said that during her conferences with Alaska's federal delegation, the issue of AWOS reliability was already brought to the attention of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and the National Weather Service (NWS) during the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018. She explained a few specific recommendations outlined by CSSJR 20(CRA) and highlighted that the resolution would be sent to the appropriate congressional committees and the chairs of those committees to ensure that they have it in their hands before the legislative session's end. She thanked Representative Mears for her work on the

aforementioned task force and highlighted her role in bringing the failures of AWOS to light.

[9:09:54 AM](#)

MIKE JONES, Economics Professor, University of Alaska (UA), gave invited testimony during the hearing on CSSJR 20(CRA). He shared his experience in listening to various air carriers from around Alaska, all of which shared that AWOS outages are a consistent point of failure that impacts their operations daily. He said AWOS enables pilots to fly in conditions that they wouldn't be able to otherwise and emphasized how failures in AWOS stations around Alaska impact every sector of rural life including food, medicine, health care, and business.

[9:12:40 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE related that he has used AWOS many times and said he hasn't used the system as much since the FAA has been developing its weather camera system. He asked if the reason the AWOS systems around the state are out of repair is due to the new weather camera system or if it is caused by a lack of parts and funding.

MR. JONES replied that Representative McCabe's question might be too specific to the FAA to answer and directed the question to Will Day.

[9:14:37 AM](#)

WILL DAY, Executive Director, Alaska Air Carriers Association (AACCA), gave invited testimony during the hearing on CSSJR 20(CRA). He explained how safer air transportation in Alaska functions by describing the difference between instrument flight rules (IFR) and visual flight rules (VFR). He said aircraft safety has greatly improved as technology has improved, allowing safe flight through inclement weather and explained the role that AWOS plays in a pilot's weather briefing before flying on a given day. He emphasized that a commercial flight may not legally take place if a pilot is not able to obtain AWOS weather data and highlighted that this caused 44 communities in Alaska over the past year to be inaccessible due to their AWOS outages.

[9:16:53 AM](#)

SENATOR HUGHES pointed out that Alaskans who work for FAA are appreciated, aware of the problems with AWOS, and need the legislature's support.

[9:18:13 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE asked how many communities in Alaska have instrument approaches.

MR. DAY said that he did not have an answer and directed the question to Don Owen.

[9:20:08 AM](#)

DON OWEN, Alaska Air Pilots, answered questions during the hearing on CSSJR 20(CRA). He explained that when an airport has no instrument approach, a method of flying known as "scud running" is utilized. He explained that scud running is an extremely dangerous way to operate and emphasized that IFR is safer. He said currently, AWOS weather data is only available by phone in many locations and the problem goes far beyond a basic system failure.

[9:23:13 AM](#)

MR. JONES, in response to Representative McCabe's question said he doesn't have an exact number of communities with IFR approaches but found records of each runway and approach in a spreadsheet.

[9:24:38 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE asked if flights could be made based on weather camera data only or if AWOS data is also required before a flight may be dispatched.

MR. OWEN replied that small air carrier operations are required to have destination weather at the estimated time of arrival and the weather must be above specified minimums in order to dispatch a flight.

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE asked whether the destination weather must come from an FAA weather camera or an AWOS system.

MR. OWEN said that weather camera data is not acceptable to dispatch a flight and said that the data must come from an AWOS system.

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE reiterated his point that it doesn't make sense that IFR flights may only be dispatched if they have current AWOS data when that system is far outdated by the newer FAA weather camera system.

MR. OWEN added that visibility minimums must be in place at a destination for a flight to even initiate an approach and without an automated surface observation system (ASOS) air carriers have no way to get information on surface visibility minimums.

[9:27:50 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE HIMSCHOOT pointed out the irony of repairing the broken weather stations if there is no way to get to them in the first place and asked if the weather data is used in NWS climate tracking databases.

MR. JONES responded that AWOS and ASOS data is used by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the NWS to build forecasting and climate models.

MR. OWEN added that aviation forecasting models, on board in flight weather observation systems, and national aviation weather studies rely on AWOS data.

REPRESENTATIVE HIMSCHOOT shared her knowledge of Yakutat's struggle with malfunctioning AWOS systems and said that she is in strong support of CSSJR 20(CRA).

[9:30:48 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE BAKER asked Mr. Jones whether there is consistency in where AWOS/ASOS outages are occurring and whether there is a timeline for their repair.

MR. JONES replied that the length of outages by any given location is not consistent and gave examples of differing AWOS/ASOS outages and their time not in service.

REPRESENTATIVE BAKER requested further information for the public.

[9:33:39 AM](#)

CHAIR MCCORMICK opened public testimony on SJR 20.

[9:34:04 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE ANDREW GRAY, Alaska State Legislature, testified in support of CSSJR 20(CRA). He explained how the outages of AWOS systems around Alaska cause flights to be delayed and emphasized the consequences of them being cancelled and their effects on communities off the road system in Alaska.

CHAIR MCCORMICK spoke on the spoilage problem in Bethel, Alaska and thanked Representative Gray for his testimony.

CHAIR MCCORMICK, after ascertaining there was no one else who wished to testify, closed public testimony on CSSJR 20(CRA).

[9:35:54 AM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE MCCABE moved to report CSSJR 20(CRA) out of committee with individual recommendations and the accompanying fiscal notes. There being no objection, CSSJR 20(CRA) was reported from the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee.

[9:36:16 AM](#)

The committee took an at-ease from 9:36 to 9:39 a.m.

[9:39:00 AM](#)

CHAIR MCCORMICK thanked the bill sponsors and invited testifiers.

[9:39:17 AM](#)

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

There being no further business before the committee, the House Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting was adjourned at 9:39 a.m.