

ALASKA STATE LEGISLATURE
SENATE COMMUNITY AND REGIONAL AFFAIRS STANDING COMMITTEE

April 9, 2024

1:32 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT

Senator Forrest Dunbar, Chair
Senator Elvi Gray-Jackson
Senator Jesse Bjorkman
Senator Cathy Giessel

MEMBERS ABSENT

Senator Donald Olson, Vice Chair

OTHER LEGISLATORS PRESENT

SENATOR HUGHES

COMMITTEE CALENDAR

HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 8

Honoring United States military veterans exposed to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War; and expressing gratitude for the courageous service of those veterans to the United States.

- MOVED HCR 8 OUT OF COMMITTEE

SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 20

Urging the United States Congress to address outages of Automated Weather Observing System stations and Automated Surface Observing System stations occurring in the state.

- HEARD & HELD

PREVIOUS COMMITTEE ACTION

BILL: HCR 8

SHORT TITLE: HONORING VIETNAM WAR VETERANS

SPONSOR(S): REPRESENTATIVE(S) SHAW

02/14/24	(H)	READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
02/14/24	(H)	MLV
02/20/24	(H)	MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
02/20/24	(H)	-- MEETING CANCELED --

02/22/24 (H) MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
 02/22/24 (H) -- MEETING CANCELED --
 02/27/24 (H) MLV AT 1:00 PM GRUENBERG 120
 02/27/24 (H) Moved HCR 8 Out of Committee
 02/27/24 (H) MINUTE (MLV)
 02/28/24 (H) MLV RPT 5DP
 02/28/24 (H) DP: GRAY, RAUSCHER, GROH, SHAW, WRIGHT
 03/11/24 (H) TRANSMITTED TO (S)
 03/11/24 (H) VERSION: HCR 8
 03/12/24 (S) READ THE FIRST TIME - REFERRALS
 03/12/24 (S) CRA
 03/26/24 (S) CRA AT 1:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
 03/26/24 (S) Heard & Held
 03/26/24 (S) MINUTE (CRA)
 04/04/24 (S) CRA AT 1:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)
 04/04/24 (S) Scheduled but Not Heard
 04/09/24 (S) CRA AT 1:30 PM BELTZ 105 (TSBldg)

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)

WITNESS REGISTER

REPRESENTATIVE LADDIE SHAW, District 9
 Alaska State Legislature
 Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Offered closing remarks on HCR 8.

ARIELLE WIGGIN, Staff
 Senator Forrest Dunbar
 Alaska State Legislature
 Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Introduced SJR 20 on behalf of the Senate Community and Regional Affairs Committee.

SENATOR SHELLEY HUGHES, District M
 Alaska State Legislature
 Juneau, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Gave invited testimony in support of SJR 20.

WILL DAY, Executive Director
 Alaska Air Carriers Association

Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SJR 20.

DAN KNESEK, Vice President
Commercial Operations at Grant Aviation
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SJR 20.

GREG DYER, Director
Airspace Services
Woolpert
Denver, Colorado

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SJR 20.

DAN OWEN, Owner/Operator
Alaska Air Transit
Anchorage, Alaska

POSITION STATEMENT: Testified in support of SJR 20.

ACTION NARRATIVE

[1:32:24 PM](#)

CHAIR FORREST DUNBAR called the Senate Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting to order at 1:32 p.m. Present at the call to order were Senators Gray-Jackson, Bjorkman, Giessel, and Chair Dunbar.

HCR 8-HONORING VIETNAM WAR VETERANS

[1:33:11 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR announced the consideration of HOUSE CONCURRENT RESOLUTION NO. 8 Honoring United States military veterans exposed to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War; and expressing gratitude for the courageous service of those veterans to the United States.

This is the second hearing of HCR 8 in the Senate Community and Regional Affairs Committee. The intention is to look to the will of the committee. He invited the resolution sponsor to make closing remarks.

[1:33:35 PM](#)

REPRESENTATIVE LADDIE SHAW, District 9, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, offered closing remarks on HCR 8 and thanked the committee for hearing the resolution. He stated that his generation did not receive much recognition upon returning from Vietnam. He noted that his veteran status has

been questioned multiple times. He expressed gratitude for the approximately 300,000 fellow veterans who did not return from Vietnam due to Agent Orange.

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CHAIR DUNBAR solicited the will of the committee.

[1:34:28 PM](#)

SENATOR GIESSEL moved to report HCR 8, work order 33-LS1314\B, from committee with individual recommendations and attached zero fiscal note(s).

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CHAIR DUNBAR found no objection and HCR 8 was reported from the Senate Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee.

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At ease

SJR 20-WEATHER OBSERVING SYSTEM STATION OUTAGES

[1:37:54 PM](#)

CHAIR DUNBAR reconvened the meeting and announced the consideration of SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 20 Urging the United States Congress to address outages of Automated Weather Observing System stations and Automated Surface Observing System stations occurring in the state.

This is the introductory hearing of SJR 20, which is sponsored by the Senate Community and Regional Affairs Committee. The intent is to hear invited and public testimony and set the resolution aside. He invited Ms. Wiggins to introduce SJR 20.

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ARIELLE WIGGIN, Staff, Senator Forrest Dunbar, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, introduced SJR 20 on behalf of the Senate Community and Regional Affairs Committee. She stated that SJR 20 urges Congress to rectify shortcomings in Alaska's weather observation systems. She emphasized that more than 80 percent of Alaska's communities are not accessible by road and highlighted that Alaska is the most sparsely populated state. She noted that critical weather observation systems are often disrupted or absent in essential areas and stated that equipment used in the Lower 48 is inadequate for Alaska's unique geography. She stressed commitment to prioritize aviation safety in Alaska and referenced six fatal commercial aviation crashes in Alaska from 2010 to 2020 where weather was a causal factor.

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CHAIR DUNBAR invited Senator Hughes to speak to the resolution.

[1:39:32 PM](#)

SENATOR SHELLEY HUGHES, District M, Alaska State Legislature, Juneau, Alaska, gave invited testimony in support of SJR 20. She thanked the committee for sponsoring SJR 20 since the time for legislators to personally submit legislation had ended. She explained that federal transportation staff were aware of [Alaska's weather observation systems] problems as early as 2018, during work on the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) reauthorization bill. Efforts were made to address the issue then, but it remains unresolved, requiring more specific action. She commended SJR 20 for clearly outlining the facts and background information, crediting contributions from expert testifiers.

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SENATOR HUGHES noted that her work on food security brought attention to the issue. The Transportation Infrastructure Committee identified weather observation system outages as a cause of food spoilage in rural communities. She credited Mr. Mike Jones with the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ICER) for raising awareness of the problem through presentations, including to the Airmen's Association. She highlighted that language addressing the issue is being worked on in both the House and Senate in Congress.

SENATOR HUGHES stressed that this issue extends beyond food, affecting passenger service, medical emergencies, and cargo transport. She emphasized the importance of Alaska's legislature speaking out, noting that Alaska's reliance on aviation for community access is unique. She stated that federal delegation members have confirmed that such resolutions can be influential and expressed hope that this effort would lead to tangible solutions in the coming years.

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CHAIR DUNBAR opened public testimony on SJR 20.

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WILL DAY, Executive Director, Alaska Air Carriers Association, Anchorage, Alaska, testified on the critical need for reliable weather observation systems, also known as Automated Weather Observation Systems (AWOS), throughout Alaska. He emphasized their importance in providing air service to rural communities

beyond the road system, which rely on aviation or marine transport for essential services. He highlighted that air transport is crucial for emergency services, including medevac, urgent medications, and essential supplies. He explained that during poor weather, commercial air carriers must use instrument flight rules, which require weather observations at both departure and destination points. Without functioning weather systems, flights cannot proceed, potentially delaying life-saving transportation for medical emergencies such as heart attacks. He stressed that a functioning AWOS can mean the difference between life and death in such cases. He encouraged others present to share specific examples illustrating the critical importance of these systems.

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DAN KNESEK, Vice President, Commercial Operations at Grant Aviation, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of SJR 20. He said he is also a member of the board of directors for the Alaska Air Carriers Association. He expressed appreciation to committee, on behalf of air carriers and general aviation in Alaska, for hearing his testimony. He emphasized the critical need for improved infrastructure. He shared his perspective as a pilot with 13 years of experience in Alaska, contrasting the state's lack of aviation infrastructure with the Lower 48. He highlighted the challenges faced by air carriers and pilots in ensuring essential services such as food, medicine, and medevac operations reach remote communities.

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MR. KNESEK noted that when he first started advocating for aviation infrastructure it was to get weather reporting in all villages. Grant Aviation serves nearly 60 communities, yet only about 30 percent have functional weather observation systems. He detailed creative but unsafe workarounds, such as using radio relays for weather reports, and explained that flying under visual flight rules (VFR) with low ceilings and poor visibility is common. He stressed the importance of instrument flight rules (IFR) for safe travel, which require FAA-approved weather observation systems, and called for the approval of alternative technologies to improve safety and service.

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MR. KNESEK criticized the outdated infrastructure, including the reliance on deteriorating copper wire communication systems for weather stations, which frequently fail. He also highlighted the broader impact on weather forecasting, as the National Weather Service depends on data from these very few functioning stations

for accurate predictions. He concluded by emphasizing that reliable weather observation systems are essential for safe travel and the livelihoods of those living off the road system in Alaska.

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GREG DYER, Director, Airspace Services, Woolpert, Denver, Colorado, testified in support of SJR 20. He expressed support for Mr. LaRue and statewide aviation efforts, noting his involvement in an aviation infrastructure gap analysis for Alaska. He stated his role in testifying is not so much to advocate to the committee as much as it is to be a resource if there are technical questions.

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MR. DYER described the weather information issue as complex, involving aviators' needs, FAA regulations governing weather data, and the hardware and communication systems that support safe flight. He emphasized that reliability problems previously mentioned are significant and directly impact community needs as outlined by Mr. Knesek.

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MR. DYER stated that the topic has been addressed in the FAA reauthorization bill passed by the House, with anticipation for reconciliation with the Senate version. He highlighted the opportunity to use current technology to reimagine regulations, improve hardware performance, and better align these elements to create a more supportable system for weather information and pilot needs moving forward.

[1:55:12 PM](#)

DAN OWEN, Owner/Operator, Alaska Air Transit, Anchorage, Alaska, testified in support of SJR 20. He said he has 20 years of aviation experience, including work with a major airline and the U.S. Navy. He shared concerns regarding the reliability of Automated Weather Observation Systems (AWOS) in Alaska. He cited a recent charter operation for the Lower Yukon School District to Scammon Bay and Hooper Bay, where neither AWOS functioned properly. Scammon Bay's AWOS had been out of service since March 29, with a projected return date of May 25, while Hooper Bay's AWOS was only accessible by phone. He highlighted connectivity issues, as data is still transmitted through outdated copper technology, though alternatives like cellular systems exist.

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MR. OWEN pointed to maintenance delays, with lengthy periods before systems are repaired, and occasional accuracy problems, particularly during extreme cold, where AWOS reports contradict visible conditions. He outlined the impacts of these deficiencies, including flight cancellations, lost revenue, and reduced access to essential services like medical care and infrastructure repairs. He emphasized the safety risks, as pilots are often forced to use nearby airports for instrument approaches and then navigate visually to the intended destination in marginal weather, reducing safety margins. He stressed the importance of addressing these issues to improve aviation reliability and community access.

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CHAIR DUNBAR closed public testimony on SJR 20.

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CHAIR DUNBAR held SJR 20 in committee.

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There being no further business to come before the committee, Chair Dunbar adjourned the Senate Community and Regional Affairs Standing Committee meeting at 2:00 p.m.