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December 13, 2016

Ms. Kimmarie Grimaldi
FSS Program Manager
Program Management Organization
Federal Aviation Administration
600 Independence Ave SW
Washington, DC 20597

Re: Future Flight Service Program Market Survey - October 2016; Contract 25898

Dear Ms. Grimaldi,

The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA), the world's largest aviation membership association, submits the following comments in response to the Future Flight Services Program (FFSP) Draft Screening Information Request (SIR). Representing several hundred thousand General Aviation pilots in the Contiguous United States, Hawaii, and Puerto Rico, AOPA advocates on behalf of the primary customers of Flight Service. We support the Flight Service modernization effort that will allow a more efficient delivery of products while improving their value. We believe the success of the FFSP and the FAA's modernization effort will only occur by collaborating with industry and vetting service changes with General Aviation users.

Based on the General Aviation pilot feedback we have received, primarily from the surveys we collaborated on with the FAA, we continue to conclude that for the foreseeable future it is unacceptable to remove a human specialist and to completely automate the briefing system. We believe the FAA should make a greater investment in self-assisted services to further the empowerment of pilots who are not obliged to call and continue to remove the barriers to utilizing self-assisted products. The FAA should ensure that in the next contract there is the ability for pilots to speak to a specialist, there are no fees for any Flight Services, and that there is a clear mechanism for the implementation of service changes over the contract's lifetime.

AOPA and FAA Collaboration Critical to Success

AOPA played a key role in defining the requirements in the current Lockheed Martin contract. Then, as now, the goal was to modernize the service and reduce costs. As a result of this collaboration, we ended up with a service that meets user needs and provides the FAA over \$300 million in annual cost savings. Building from that previous success, in 2015, AOPA began a close collaboration with the FAA to gather and analyze new data that would clarify pilot utilization of Flight Service and inform future requirements, laying the foundation for this Draft SIR.

Through analysis completed in partnership with the Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University (ERAU) and Indiana University (IU), AOPA and the FAA were able to get a data driven picture

of why and how General Aviation pilots utilize Flight Service today. Those surveys provided the quantitative and qualitative data necessary to make informed recommendations on service changes that would improve services for pilots and provide the best value for the government. Those recommendations and supporting data were then brought forward to a larger user group, composed of entities like the National Business Aviation Association and the Helicopter Association International, for further validation that General Aviation would benefit from the FFSP.

AOPA believes continuing our close collaboration, outlined in the June 2016 Memorandum of Agreement, is important to ensuring the users of the service properly vet requirements and levels of service. Close communication with users was also a recommendation of the November 2016 Office of Inspector General (OIG) Flight Service Stations Audit Report. That report highlighted the benefits of including users throughout the process of changing requirements. The best venue for this continuing collaboration and user engagement is the Flight Service National Airspace System (NAS) Efficient Streamlined Services (FSNESS) committee.

AOPA submits FSNESS should be formally tasked with implementation of the Flight Service Discussion Document drafted at the September 21 and 22 user group meeting. This document represents the recommendations of Flight Service users for future service changes and it should be implemented in collaboration with industry. The FSNESS user group should vet any future service changes and should be involved in the review of the Concept of Operations for Flight Service to ensure customer needs are accounted for in the long-term plans of Flight Service.

Human Delivered Services Must be Part of New Contract

AOPA does not support the discontinuance of the Flight Service specialist provided preflight service. We believe the Flight Service specialist will be necessary for the foreseeable future and as part of the FFSP. The Lockheed Martin data pointing to a decrease in telephone briefings fails to address why pilots still call and in such great numbers. We contend that solely listing the decline in utilization is misleading when the service is still used on average over 4,500 times per day.

The OIG report notes the unknown impact of this change stating “the safety and operations of this change is uncertain and a departure from the past.” The removal of this safety critical position is not realistic given what we currently know and the additional questions that are not yet resolved that were identified jointly by the FAA and AOPA. There are significant safety and regulatory challenges that make this proposal problematic and that have failed to be addressed in prior studies by the FAA or over the past year of collaborative study. For example:

- The ERAU and IU “Technical Research Report on General Aviation Pilot Beliefs About Obtaining a Standard Pilot Weather Briefing” noted “being assured of a legal record and [Temporary Flight Restriction] TFRs and other NOTAMs” is a reason pilots call. The FAA has many resources that point to calling Flight Service as a primary source for this information. Receiving the latest TFR information may only be done via telephone or radio and penetrating a TFR can have significant enforcement considerations.
- Given the increasing number of NOTAMs applicable to even a short flight, many pilots call to ensure they are aware of the significant NOTAMs impacting their flight that may have

been overlooked. Additional improvements to the NOTAM system are needed prior to removing this important safety net for General Aviation pilots.

- In many cases, a pilot will not have access to the internet at General Aviation airports and must call to receive a preflight briefing. Under certain weather conditions a pilot is required to file a flight plan but this may not be possible should a specialist not be available via the telephone. Access to the NAS could be obstructed for many General Aviation pilots should the telephone service be removed.
- The Technical Research Report notes many pilots call to ask questions about what the weather is predicted to do. Aviators rely on these trained expert's insight to make an informed decision. Providing this wisdom is something a robot could not do. Many commercial operators are required to have a dispatcher or meteorologist available to answer pilot questions as it is routine to need additional input to make an informed decision. It could reduce safety if this second opinion and resource was discontinued for General Aviation.

Many barriers prevent the realization of a fully automated preflight service, but we propose that working together we can promote the utilization of online self-assisted services and see the migration of many more General Aviation pilots to automated services. The FAA should continue to promote the benefits of self-assisted services, require promotion of these automated services by the future service provider, and should continue to work to remove the barriers identified by users. For example, the FAA should act on the recommendations made by the RTCA "Improving Graphical Temporary Flight Restrictions in the NAS" committee and remove the barriers preventing pilots from accessing legal TFR information via the internet.

No User Fee for Flight Services

AOPA is opposed to any fee for services associated with aviation safety. We are strongly concerned that the language the FAA uses in multiple supporting documents of the Draft SIR is vague and leaves room for the charging of fees for current or future services provided to pilots. We believe allowing the service provider to charge fees for information required by the FAA for compliance with the Federal Aviation Regulations would set a dangerous precedent and lead to many pilots not having access to critical information. The FAA must clarify the currently ambiguous language in the Final SIR to indicate that the charging of fees for any aviation service is not being considered.

Pilots are required by 14 C.F.R. §91.103, *Preflight action*, to become familiar with all information pertinent to that flight. This information may only be available to a General Aviation pilot via Flight Services. For example, pilots are required to file a flight plan to fly IFR or to gain access to the SFRA. Submitting that flight plan may only be possible via Flight Service for many pilots. Charging a fee will cause pilots to utilize other services that may not meet regulatory requirements. The FAA must ensure all Flight Services remain free and accessible.

As the FAA works to modernize and improve Flight Service as part of the FFSP, they should not undermine pilot utilization by allowing the future service provider to charge for existing, new, or improved services. The contract must not include provisions for the commercialization of improved services, such as an enhanced web portal. AOPA contends that innovation can be incentivized by the FAA in a manner that does not adversely impact the pilot nor cause an inflated cost for the government. We also believe confined commercialization can take place,

such as collecting advertising revenue, but do not agree that Flight Services should have any associated user fee.

FAA Must Include a Pathway for Innovation over Lifetime of Next Contract

The FAA must ensure there is an effective pathway for on-ramping new programs during the lifetime of the next contract. As technology and user behavior evolve, it is important that new services can be added efficiently that will allow Flight Services to continue to meet the needs of General Aviation pilots. It is foreseeable that new services, such as those focused on Unmanned Aircraft pilots, may need to be added and an efficient mechanism must be built into the contract to ensure that integration can take place. Likewise, the pathway for service changes that may require reduction or discontinuance of a service must also have an efficient pathway that accounts for user input and the safety management system process.

AOPA Recommendations for Draft SIR

Below are AOPA's comments to the documents provided in support of the Draft SIR.

Description of Services for Future Flight Service Program, Section J-1

- A. Page 5: Flight Service Description. The FAA states “pilots can obtain preflight information and file flight plans through an online web portal” versus calling. AOPA concurs that the existing web portal meets user needs because of the lack of disclaimers and the user friendliness of the presentation of the information. The FAA must continue to support a web portal that can be relied upon to comply with regulations and that will present the information in an intuitive manner. The FAA should work to remove the disclaimers on other existing FAA websites and promote that these other free websites can be relied upon for meeting regulatory requirements.

- B. Page 7: Users/Stakeholders. The FAA regularly has scheduled and unscheduled outages impacting the NOTAM system. The FAA is planning to conduct the NAIMES Disaster Recovery Test after FNS replaces the USNS in the Summer/Fall of 2017. This test will result in all pilot NOTAM websites being unavailable. The only opportunity for pilots to receive NOTAMs, including Part 121 dispatchers relaying NOTAMs to commercial pilots, will be by calling Flight Service. It is important that the FAA understand the reliance internally and externally on the ability to call Flight Service for mission critical information.

- C. Page 21: Self-Assisted Services. The requirements for the web portal state the portal must provide the information required by the FAA JO 7110.10 and provide graphics. AOPA is concerned that there are no specific requirements for minimum functionality, to include: (a) the overlaying of weather and aeronautical information over a proposed route; (b) the option for plain language interpretation of complex information like NOTAMs and METARs; and (c) a discussion of human factors as it relates to the presentation of the information. AOPA's surveys showed the existing DUATS web portals were the least frequently used method to obtain a preflight briefing. We believe flexibility in the requirements should be provided to allow innovation by the service provider and to allow agility when it comes to updating the web portal; however, the FAA must ensure the future self-assisted services will meet user

needs and be utilized. Over 82% of AOPA members who fly in the areas impacted by the FFSP use an Electronic Flight Bag routinely in the cockpit. It is important the FAA and the next service provider embrace this technology and provide functionality/connectivity to Flight Services over these popular platforms.

Strategic Plan, Section J-9

- A. Page 1: Introduction. The FAA states that “costs can be reduced by focusing on changing user behavior and migrating to automated, self-assisted service delivery models, while still maintaining quality of service and safety.” The prior sentence states the FAA supposes this transformation can be successfully conducted over a 15-year period. AOPA disagrees that it is foreseeable that full automation of the service may be possible within the next 15 years. This paragraph should be amended to clarify the next contract may be for a 15-year period; however, full automation of the service may take longer and may not occur within that timeframe.
- B. Page 2: Strategy. The FAA states a supporting strategy to realizing their goal of cost reduction includes allowing the “Service Provider to offer ‘premium’ services to pilots.” As discussed, AOPA is opposed to any fee for service. We believe current and future services provided to pilots must be sustained and no fees charged for utilizing enhanced or improved services. It would adversely impact safety if pilots were charged a fee to comply with a regulatory requirement put in place by the FAA, for example, filing a flight plan. The FAA must clarify that “premium services” only apply to non-aeronautical products, such as arranging a rental car, and that there will be no fee for any aviation related product or service. Any non-aeronautical product being proposed to have an associated fee should require user concurrence prior to it being accepted by the FAA.
- C. Page 2: Strategy. The FAA states a cost reduction strategy includes encouraging the service provider to work with 3rd party vendors. Many 3rd party vendors only have access to flight critical information, such as flight briefings, via the current service provider, Leidos (formerly Lockheed Martin). These same 3rd party providers account for most of the online briefings requested by pilots. Online briefings provided by the FAA’s service provider are considered by many pilots the only legal way to prepare for a flight, other than to call, because this briefing method provides a record of the transaction. The FAA should make it a requirement that the future service provider support access to flight plan filing and briefings for 3rd party vendors. If 3rd party vendors, like ForeFlight, were to lose access, it would likely increase the calls to the service provider, increase cost, and impede the transition of pilots to automated services.
- D. Page 2: Strategy. The FAA proposes to “eliminate or reduce services that are redundant, obsolete, or do not support end-state core functions such as [Search and Rescue (SAR)].” General Aviation pilots have regularly indicated in surveys that SAR is the most important service Flight Service provides. The FAA must continue to provide SAR services, regardless of whether it is the next service provider or air traffic control, as this service is critical to safe operations for all pilots. AOPA does not support any reduction in service of SAR; therefore, we believe this statement should be removed or clarified.

- E. Page 2: Strategy. The FAA states they will support further use of technology by enabling “more inflight services through automated platforms.” AOPA does not believe any reduction of inflight services can be achieved while FIS-B remains restricted for advisory use only and while there is no certainty of reception in many areas of the NAS. The FAA should continue to invest in FIS-B and promote its capabilities, but the FAA cannot consider this technology a replacement for inflight services until additional improvements are made.
- F. Page 4: Current Operating Environment. The FAA states they intend “to continue the current delivery model for Alaska” Flight Service. AOPA concurs and believes service changes in Alaska should only occur if they are discussed in advance by established Alaska user groups.
- G. Page 10: Strategic Vision for Future Flight Services. The FAA states they would like to see the future “Service Provider...capture revenue from additional sources other than the FAA.” AOPA agrees that advertising revenue would be an acceptable method of the realization of outside funding; however, we do not believe 3rd party vendors should be required to pay the service provider for any access that they are provided for free by the current service provider. The FAA should clarify that “additional sources” do not include charging users or 3rd party vendors a fee when it comes to accessing aeronautical services.

Evaluation Factors, Section M

- A. Page 5: Subfactor - Stakeholder Engagement and Communication Strategy. We strongly believe that proactive engagement with General Aviation pilots is important to the success of the FFSP. AOPA proposes the service provider should be given the flexibility and authority to (a) promote Flight Services; (b) advertise/market their capabilities and services; (c) enter partnership agreements with General Aviation trade groups; (d) educate pilots face-to-face, such as at air shows or fly-ins, or virtually, such as via webinar; and (e) have direct dialogues with General Aviation pilots. The service provider’s plan for ongoing engagement with stakeholder groups should be focused on understanding pilot related Flight Service problems, user requirements, and the impacts of proposed service changes. The FAA should apply considerable weight to this evaluation factor and require the next service provider to have a detailed and robust plan for stakeholder engagement and communications that includes the elements we detail above. AOPA is ready to actively engage with the future service provider and participate in stakeholder meetings.

Conclusion

AOPA supports the modernization effort of Flight Services and will continue to work closely with the FAA in identifying areas where improvements and efficiency can be achieved. Through the intensive work of AOPA and the FAA this past year, the Draft SIR reflects many of the requirements General Aviation has for the next Flight Service contract. We believe the FAA has captured many of the recommendations from industry in the supporting documents; however, we contend additional clarification is needed in several sections, as we identified above. AOPA looks forward to continuing our collaboration with FAA Flight Services as we work together to ensure that FFSP will support General Aviation’s needs.

We appreciate the opportunity to collaborate on a plan that will address the FAA's goal of becoming an "enabler" of flight services and that recognizes the ongoing needs of many pilots to speak to a Flight Service specialist. We have promoted the benefits of the Flight Service websites because of their innate value, such as the availability of graphics, and we agree that creating additional reasons to utilize online tools is important. However, it is clear from our joint analysis of current barriers and user needs that this human provided service, utilized on average over 4,500 times per day, cannot be removed. Through the venue of FSNESS, the FAA should work with industry stakeholders to continue the analysis of user's needs and appropriate service changes.

We look forward to working with the FAA and our industry partners to ensure Flight Service remains accessible and effective for General Aviation. Thank you for reviewing our comments on this important issue. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Rune Duke at 202-509-9515.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Melissa Rudinger". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Melissa Rudinger
Vice President, Government Affairs

The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA) is a not-for-profit individual membership organization of General Aviation Pilots and Aircraft Owners. AOPA's mission is to effectively serve the interests of its members and establish, maintain and articulate positions of leadership to promote the economy, safety, utility and popularity of flight in General Aviation aircraft. Representing two thirds of all pilots in the United States, AOPA is the largest civil aviation organization in the world.