

The Alaska Journal of Commerce

New aviation deputy commissioner lays out challenges

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Although he's only been on the job for a month, Marc Luiken was primed to face questions from state legislators at a state Senate Transportation Committee aviation overview June 29.

Luiken is the new deputy commissioner for aviation of the state Department of Transportation and Public Facilities and "has hit the ground running," said state DOT Commissioner Leo von Scheben.

Luiken previously served in the U.S. Air Force for 29 years before retiring June 1. There, he oversaw missions flying for two wings, and served as Vice Commander of the 11th Air Force.

"What I see is a person who is tied to aviation, not only as a technical person, but also one that flies airplanes and understands that part of our system," von Scheben said.

Luiken's presentation listed the challenges facing Alaska aviation he would focus on most in the coming years. Maintenance and operations at rural airports topped the list, and he said he'd maintain the emphasis that his predecessor, Christine Klein, placed on that issue.

Another of his focus areas will be federal policy. Luiken said ensuring that the state was compliant with Federal Aviation Administration mandates was paramount. Roughly \$230 million was spent through an airport incentive program on runway safety areas over the last five years, Luiken said.

Runway safety areas are buffer areas on either side of a runway that allow planes to land safely on the pavement even if they over- or undershoot the landing.

Luiken also said the FAA was pressuring the state to address pavement conditions on runways. He said the department will spend between \$40 million and \$50 million through the same airport incentive program on pavement in fiscal year 2011.

Luiken also wants to examine an advance notice of proposed rulemaking from the Environmental Protection Agency that looks to examine the effect on air quality of lead emissions from piston-engine aircraft.

Industry officials and others have expressed worry that the EPA will force carriers to retrofit their airplanes and ban the use of fuel with any lead content, which could sever

crucial transportation links to small communities that rely on piston-engine aircraft for groceries and mail.

DOT aviation policy planner Rich Sewell said DOT is concerned that a ban on leaded fuel would result in pilots loading their planes with unleaded fuel, which is dangerous because the lead in the fuel they now use prevents engines from "knocking," or spontaneously exploding, under intense loads and temperatures.

Luiken said the rulemaking has the potential to "impact Alaska's economy and, really, our way of life."

In an e-mail to its members, the Alaska Air Carriers Association unveiled language U.S. Rep. Don Young would like to add to the FAA Reauthorization bill that would effectively bring industry and the FAA into the discussion in a more meaningful way.

In a telephone interview, the Republican congressman said the EPA has shoved aside the FAA despite concerns the FAA may have regarding the safety issues associated with unleaded fuel.

The language also brings economic feasibility into the discussion. The EPA is not mandated to consider the impact of such a rulemaking on the rural communities of Alaska, Young said, and he wants to correct that.

Young said he's reached out to Alaska Sens. Mark Begich and Lisa Murkowski to get them to insert language like this on the U.S. Senate side, and they've been sympathetic so far, he said.

If he and some colleagues can't convince Rep. Jim Oberstar, R-Minn., who chairs the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, to try and insert the language into the bill, Young said he'll move to directly kill any EPA regulations that result from the proposed rulemaking.

"I'll do everything in my power to kill the regulation," he said. "Any time you've got an agency passing a regulation, you always try to kick the snake in the head immediately."

The House and Senate versions of the bill have passed, but the two chambers are still working out the differences between the two. Among the most controversial differences is a provision in the House version that would allow certain FedEx Express employees to unionize more easily.

Source: The Alaska Journal of Commerce