AIRBUS CHIEF URGES ACTION ON U.S. ATC SYSTEM REFORM

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Action, not more debate, is needed to transition the U.S. air traffic system out of FAA and into a stand-alone corporation, Airbus Americas' chief and former FAA administrator Allan McArtor told a Washington DC audience Sep. 2.

Speaking at an International Aviation Club lunch meeting, the Airbus Americas chairman and CEO said the U.S. national air traffic control system needed to be "free from political shenanigans" and removed from the federal procurement system.

"It's high time to move beyond words and into action," he said.

McArtor, who headed FAA from 1987 to 1989, said ATC system reform should be meaningful -- not a whitewash -- and should follow the models set by Canada and New Zealand, which spun off their ATC systems and now see fewer delays and greater efficiencies while maintaining safety standards. He said the U.S. didn't need any more "studies, debates or red-herring arguments about compromising safety", but instead needed "innovation, courage, conviction and technical excellence".

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"I want the safest ATC system in the world, but I also want the most efficient system in the world," he said. "We have the safest system in the world, but that's not the issue. It's about efficiency."

McArtor proposed that a new corporate national ATC system entity should have a board of directors from all aspects of the industry and who are business people. The enterprise should be "an all new company with a fresh start", allowing FAA "to get out of the business of controlling air traffic and to focus on what it does best - safety and certification."

He also suggested the entity be given five-to-seven years' worth of congressional funding, after which it should no longer need government money. For funds, McArtor said he was not opposed to the idea of a modest, fixed access fee levied per aircraft -- "perhaps 50 bucks" -- or a user fee system that the major carriers were happy with.

"I don't think there's going to be any resistance from the community; I think you will get applause," McArtor said.

Asked how to get the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) union to sign up for such a change, McArtor said the skills of NATCA members would be needed, but there would also need to be changes in rules.

He added that the FAA and ATC reform bill proposed by House of Representatives Transportation and Infrastructure Committee chairman Bill Shuster (R-Pennsylvania) "is a good start" as an action step, but all of industry "has to move in the same direction" to make a sea-change happen.

Momentum for the idea of taking the U.S. ATC system out of FAA and putting it under the governance of a commercialized, not-for-profit organization is growing. Several major U.S. airline CEOs have expressed a strong desire for a new approach, including American Airlines' Doug Parker and United Airlines' Jeff Smisek. Most stakeholders acknowledge that the current, politicized system does not allow for consistent, long-term funding and needs to be overhauled. NATCA has called a semi-privatization approach "intriguing".

Even with recent technological improvements to the ATC system, there have been setbacks. On Aug. 15 a software glitch in a new and much touted ATC computer system forced controllers to revert to backup, manual procedures. The result was almost 500 commercial flight delays and another 470 cancellations up and down the U.S. east coast. The failure was tracked to the Lockheed Martin En Route Automation Modernization (ERAM) system that went operational in April and replaced a 40-year-old En Route Host computer system that managed traffic in U.S. airspace at all 20 of FAA's en route ATC centers.

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