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United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-1903

November 29, 2011

The Honorable Raymond H. LaHood
Secretary
United States Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue Southeast
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary LaHood:

I write to you today regarding the Essential Air Service program, of which you have been a champion and vocal advocate -- I know you agree that rural passengers deserve equal access to our nation's air transportation network. As such, I urge you to consider passenger access to major hubs as you exercise your discretion to waive the 15-passenger requirement for Essential Air Service. It is critically important that airports located more than 200 air-nautical miles from medium or large hubs have service provided by aircraft that have the appropriate range, passenger amenities, and safety equipment to directly connect rural communities with hubs that provide direct service to common destinations.

As you know the Consolidated and Further Continuing Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2012 included a legislative provision striking the requirement that aircraft used to provide Essential Air Service have a 15-passenger capacity. Two airports in my state are currently requesting bids for service to replace a carrier held into service by DOT order, and I am concerned that bids for service to Presque Isle will result in the selection of a carrier providing service incompatible with the needs of the community. Both the airport's manager and community residents have expressed serious concerns for the service that could be provided by smaller aircraft as allowed by the appropriations bill. In determining a carrier to serve the Presque Isle market, the selection of a carrier with appropriate aircraft for the distance and severe winter weather conditions is essential. Any selected carrier must have equipment, including appropriate on-board deicing systems designed to provide reliable service in the extreme cold of Maine's winters.

Efficient air service for Presque Isle and the communities of Aroostook County serves as a critical link to tourism, recreation, and business. For communities more than 200 air nautical miles from a large hub airport, use of a 15-passenger aircraft is an essential element in connecting rural communities to the air transportation network. I am concerned that the communities most in need of service guarantees will be cut off from the air transportation network as a result of this change. Service provided by a smaller aircraft would require

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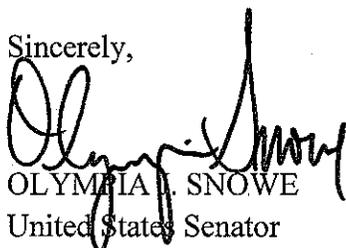
additional stops and delays and make transportation to these areas more challenging. Air service to Presque Isle that requires an intermediary stop would cause unnecessary delay, and further inhibit the ability of visitors and business people to access the area. Uncomplicated access to the community by air truly makes a difference between investment in the region and the abandonment of our rural areas.

The closest commercial airport to Presque Isle is in Bangor, Maine, more than 150 miles away, much of which is on a two-lane undivided highway. Travel for business or tourism would be severely impacted by a reduction in direct flights to a major hub. Critical economic activity including the timely repair of highly technical lumber and agricultural equipment would be delayed by any reduction in service caused by increasing the number of stops on a flight to the area. This includes access to the former Loring Air Force Base, and redevelopment activities centered in the region. In addition, access to border crossings maintained by the Federal Government would be more difficult. The region served by Presque Isle Regional Airport, Aroostook County, is over 6,000 square miles and travel within its borders is long and arduous, particularly during the winter months. The ability to fly directly into the community enables professional, business, and recreational traveler to continue to bring vitality and versatility to the most rural regions of Maine.

Finally, dozens of community members and businesses have responded to the airport's market survey, and additional survey requests remain outstanding. I believe that the information provided in this survey will aide air carriers in their bid process. I request that you provide a 60-day extension of the bidding period to allow for the completion of the survey and a thorough analysis of the results by airport and airline professionals.

Thank you for your consideration of these requests. Should you have any questions, please contact Allison Cullin of my office at (202) 224-5344. I look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,



OLYMPIA J. SNOWE
United States Senator