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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Dec. 05, 2023

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HAI Tells Congress: Keep Our National Parks Open to All, Including Air Tour Operators

Alexandria, Va. (Dec. 05, 2023) – In testimony before Congress, two members of Helicopter Association International (HAI) urged lawmakers to encourage the National Park Service (NPS) and the FAA to reevaluate rules that limit or eliminate air tours over US national parks.

“The rushed and misguided process limits and, in some cases, eliminates tours of our national parks by air without consideration of the operational, environmental, and access issues for the public and air tour operators,” said Mark A. Schlaefli, president of Rushmore Helicopters, Black Hills Aerial Adventures, and Badger Helicopters, and vice chair of the HAI Board of Directors.

“Congress and stakeholders, working together, created the road map for the development of Air Tour Management Plans (ATMPs), which is now being ignored in the rush to complete all the plans within two years,” said Jake Tomlin, president of Papillon Grand Canyon Helicopters & Grand Canyon Scenic Airlines, who also testified.

In 2000, the National Parks Air Tours Management Act was signed into law, requiring the NPS, FAA, and other stakeholders, including air tour operators, to collaborate on air tour management plans (ATMPs) to regulate the airspace over America’s national parks. Due to delays, federal courts intervened to mandate the completion of ATMPs within a two-year timeframe. However, because of this imposed, hasty deadline, federal officials have expedited the completion of these plans with minimal consideration for how the proposed changes may affect safety, the public, national parks, or air tour operations.

In a memo, the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations also emphasized the issue of access.

"Air tour operators assist millions of Americans who might not otherwise be able to access the National Park System. Air tours provide an alternative option for the elderly and individuals with physical limitations to experience the beauty of our National Park System. Many Americans do not have the capacity to walk or hike long distances for a multitude of reasons, and air tours provide an opportunity for those individuals to interact with the parks in ways they could not otherwise."

Schlaefli also highlighted the limited impact that overflights have on the national parks.

“Air tours are ultra-low impact and require no ground-based infrastructure at the park, which allows visitors accessibility without the need for roads, trails, signs, bathrooms, garbage cans, or other services. We leave nothing behind and take only memories,” Schlaefli added.

More concerning, as Tomlin pointed out, is the negative impact on the safety of those in the air and on the ground.

“Not involving crucial stakeholders like air tour operators in this procedure led to plans for the initial parks that raise significant safety issues,” Tomlin added.

Tomlin went on to cite several safety concerns, including tour routes that conflict with nearby airports and military installations, aircraft being permitted to fly within 500 feet of one another, no consideration for weather, and no coordinated radio communications in the area.

Both of HAI’s witnesses said the NPS failed to consider the devastating impact of the ATMPs on their businesses and their ability to retain their employees.

“The ATMP for Mount Rushmore National Memorial and Badlands National Park eliminates any aerial tour flights of these areas. This action affects more than 9,000 flights that were previously approved by the FAA. It has effectively put an end to our operations there,” Schlaefli said.

Tomlin added that “the NPS has failed to inquire about the potential economic consequences of implementing a plan that limits overflights. It is clear from the plans already introduced that the overall strategy is to cut back flights to such a degree that it is no longer economically feasible for air tour companies to stay in business.”

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HAI is the professional trade association for the global helicopter industry and represents more than 1,100 companies and over 16,000 industry professionals in more than 65 countries. Each year, HAI members safely operate more than 3,700 helicopters and remotely piloted aircraft approximately 2.9 million hours. HAI is dedicated to the promotion of the helicopter as a safe, effective business tool that provides unique advantages to society and to the advancement of the international vertical aviation community.