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Before the House Subcommittee on Aviation

FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024: Stakeholder Perspectives on Implementation One Year Later

Wednesday, June 4, 2025

Chairman Nehls and Ranking Member Cohen, thank you for the opportunity to provide the vertical aviation industry's perspective on the implementation of the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024.

VAI is the trade association for the civil vertical aviation industry, representing more than 1,000 aviation businesses and 15,000 aviation professionals in 75 nations. VAI is dedicated to fueling the growth of the vertical aviation industry through connection, education, advocacy, and safety so that communities around the world are strengthened by the power of vertical flight. VAI is unique among aviation associations in that our members reflect all sectors of the vertical aviation industry, including operators of unmanned aircraft systems (UAS), next generation vertical-takeoff-and-landing (VTOL) aircraft (often called AAM aircraft), and helicopters, as well as the full range of companies that support and supply the industry, including manufacturers and education and training, maintenance, and other service providers.

First, I want to express our appreciation to this Subcommittee for your continued recognition of the critical role vertical flight plays in our national transportation and emergency response systems. The 2024 FAA Reauthorization Act contains meaningful reforms that support the operational needs of today's rotorcraft and powered-lift aircraft while laying the groundwork for safe, scalable integration of next-generation vertical flight technologies. The Act gives us a solid roadmap—we now need to ensure it gets implemented on time and in full.

Proper execution of statutory provisions is essential to realizing the full potential of the 2024 FAA Reauthorization Act. Section 627, in particular, is a pivotal mandate to enhance the safety, predictability, and functionality of low-altitude IFR operations for rotorcraft and powered-lift aircraft. We urge the FAA to act with urgency and clarity—and we ask that Congress maintain rigorous oversight to ensure the agency follows both the letter and the intent of the law.

Additionally, we encourage the FAA to engage closely with subject matter experts, like VAI, as it carries out the implementation of FAA Reauthorization. Leveraging the expertise and

on-the-ground experience of industry partners will be key in ensuring successful and timely outcomes.

In this testimony, I will address the importance of Section 627 and the broader challenges and opportunities facing the vertical aviation industry today.

Section 627 Implementation

Section 627 of the FAA Reauthorization Act directs the FAA to initiate a rulemaking process within three years to establish or update low-altitude IFR routes and procedures for rotorcraft and powered-lift aircraft using performance-based navigation. This mandate arrives at a critical juncture. The recent tragic midair collision over Washington, D.C. is a solemn reminder of the criticality of ensuring safety in the national airspace at all flight levels, including low level flight. The FAA must act decisively to ensure its ongoing efforts to improve low-altitude safety are meaningfully integrated with the implementation of Section 627.

To fulfill the intent of Section 627, the FAA must initiate internal planning and pre-rulemaking activities without delay and clearly communicate its timeline for stakeholder engagement and formal rulemaking. We urge the agency to prioritize the most congested and operationally complex airspace for early implementation efforts.

As part of this mandate, the FAA must modernize the Helicopter Route Chart Program by revising outdated routes and improving publication practices to reflect performance-based navigation capabilities.

This work must also be fully integrated with the Department of Transportation's broader air traffic control modernization initiatives, particularly those focused on enabling digital separation and optimizing low-altitude corridors. VAI backs the Administration's Air Traffic Control Modernization Plan and is a member of the Modern Skies Coalition which strongly supports the Plan. While the Plan appropriately focuses on investment in people, equipment, and facilities, low-altitude flights must be incorporated in the operations considered for modernization initiatives.

Finally, the FAA must assess whether it has the technical expertise, budgetary support, and staffing levels necessary to carry out Section 627 on schedule. If gaps exist, the agency should identify and communicate the specific resources required to accelerate progress—especially in high-density, mixed-use airspace environments.

Essential Service to the American Public

Vertical lift aircraft play an irreplaceable role in serving the American public across a wide range of missions. Critical missions include search and rescue, medical evacuations,

firefighting, law enforcement, post-disaster access and evacuations, critical infrastructure inspection and repair, homeland security, news and traffic monitoring, construction and heavy lifting, and forest management.

Americans saw first-hand the criticality of helicopter response during last year's Hurricane Helene which devastated parts of North Carolina – many areas were completely inaccessible by road. Over 506 helicopters were deployed by the National Guard and approximately 1007 helicopters were contributed by private volunteers and organizations. These helicopters were critical in conducting search and rescue missions, delivering medical supplies, and reaching areas that were otherwise completely decimated.

A similar call to service was seen with the catastrophic Palisades and Eaton fires in the Los Angeles, California area last year. At the peak of operations, 60 helicopters were deployed to fight these fires – all vital in mitigating the impact of these fires and saving countless lives, homes, and businesses.

In 2024 alone, the U.S. government contracted 986 helicopters for wildfire response, including both large-capacity aircraft (Type 1) capable of delivering substantial water or retardant payloads and large crew transport and medium/light helicopters (Type 2) utilized for small crew transport, reconnaissance and tactical water drops.

Vertical aviation continues to grow in aircraft and services provided. Clearly defined, up-to-date, and technologically advanced routing infrastructure provides increased efficiency and safety to vertical lift allowing the industry to better respond to the next wildfire, hurricane, or large-scale emergency.

Continual Advancement

Emerging technology, notably Vertical Takeoff and Landing (VTOL), Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS), and aircraft with advanced propulsion systems, autonomous capabilities, or fly-by-wire systems, are positioned to greatly influence the global aviation industry over the next decade. Conservative projections value this segment at over \$20.8 billion by 2035, signaling a significant expansion of the vertical flight ecosystem.

The performance, capabilities, and flight profiles of AAM can take advantage of and benefit from a low-altitude airspace structure that is flexible, data-driven, and aligned with performance-based navigation standards. Section 627 mandates the FAA to establish or update IFR routes and procedures for rotorcraft and powered-lift aircraft—including many AAM and eVTOL platforms—ensuring that tomorrow's aircraft have a safe, predictable, and scalable path to integration in the National Airspace System.

Section 627 is not just about today's helicopters—it is about building an airspace environment capable of supporting the next generation of vertical flight. If implemented with urgency and precision, it will help unlock the full potential of emerging aircraft, secure U.S. leadership in advanced air mobility, and support a vibrant, high-tech manufacturing sector that benefits communities nationwide.

Conclusion

The vertical lift industry is and will remain a cornerstone of America's economy, public safety infrastructure, and emergency response capability. From saving lives during natural disasters to supporting daily operations in law enforcement, infrastructure, and logistics, the industry enhances the quality of life across the country. As the sector evolves with new technologies and growing mission demands, the systems that support it—especially low-altitude airspace infrastructure—must evolve as well.

Section 627 of the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 is a critical step toward that evolution. Its successful implementation will help ensure that rotorcraft and powered-lift aircraft can operate safely, predictably, and efficiently in increasingly congested and complex environments. It also lays the foundation for integrating advanced technologies and aircraft into a more modern, performance-based airspace system.

VAI appreciates the opportunity to provide input as part of this hearing and stands ready to be a constructive partner in ensuring the success of Section 627. We welcome continued collaboration with Congress, the FAA, and industry stakeholders to implement this Act in a way that supports national security, public safety, and the future of vertical flight in the United States.