

Mr. Chairman, Members, and fellow Montanans:

I am Doug Chapman, owner of an air charter company in Bozeman, and I am speaking in support of HB468. I have been in aviation in Montana for over 30 years, and feel that this bill is a productive step toward bringing the right approach to aviation safety and economic accountability at a state level, as well as opportunities for aviation businesses in our state.

My company has been providing fixed-wing aviation services with the federal and state government for many years in the areas of wildlife research, fire fighting, search & rescue, law enforcement, and other missions.

One airplane, which I acquired in 2003, is used primarily for fire-related missions for the Forest Service and Department of the Interior. Due to the nature of the fire seasons for the past several years, this particular airplane has been consistently unprofitable for the last six years. In view of the rampant beetle kill throughout the region's forests, it seems to me that we are likely going to see very increased fire activity in the near future, so I am doing my best to keep this plane for my call-when-needed contracts. It has become evident that I am competing more each year with the State of Montana Department of Natural Resources for fire detection missions which I can provide through my contract with the U.S. Forest Service, or if the state issued a contract for those services.

There is a clear correlation between the increasing fleet of aircraft owned by the State of Montana and the reduction of use of aircraft in the private sector, particularly helicopters. It is difficult to compete with an organization that I subsidize with my tax dollars, and which does not have to realistically account for true operating costs, and does not have to meet the same standards of maintenance, airworthiness, pilot training, and oversight that private sector operators do. Aviation businesses will continue to go out of business if the government is allowed to take over their functions.

The DNRC plane that crashed last month here in Helena is one that competes directly with the services I provide. I can tell you that it is not viable to rebuild that aircraft, and if the DNRC chooses to do so, the taxpayers of Montana will again be paying for a system that is not transparent about true costs.

I am pleased that the Legislature is looking closely at areas where money can be saved, and where businesses of this state can provide services in a competitive environment that results in more jobs, more safety, and more efficient use of our money.

Thank you.  
Doug Chapman  
Montana Aircraft, Inc.