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Opening Statement of Chairman Ro Khanna Hearing on “Toxic Air: How Leaded Aviation Fuel Is Poisoning America’s Children” July 28, 2022

Thank you to our panel for being here, both in person and virtually. I am honored to welcome two residents of San Jose today, Maricela Lechuga and County of Santa Clara Supervisor Cindy Chavez. Maricela lives in East San Jose, blocks away from the Reid-Hillview airport. Her Mexican-American family has lived in the area for generations, and you will hear her powerful firsthand testimony about how leaded fuel impacts her family’s and her neighbors’ day-to-day lives. Supervisor Chavez is a powerhouse who has become a national leader in the fight to get lead out of aviation fuels. She is a fighter for the working class, and cares deeply about the most vulnerable in our community. I’m also happy to welcome Ranking Member Herrell to her first Subcommittee hearing as Ranking Member. I look forward to working together on robust environmental oversight.

I’m holding this hearing today because I am outraged that our federal agencies have failed to prevent lead poisoning near small, “general aviation” airports.

There are 20,000 such airports across the country, mostly sited in communities of color and low-wealth communities. Not only is this a historic injustice, but worse, still going on today. The Federal Aviation Administration has chosen a path of delay, holding up the approval of a lead-free alternative fuel for no stated reason. Worse, in similar tactics to those we’ve seen in our Committee’s investigation of climate delay and disinformation, the fossil fuel industry and other special interests have also sought to delay the phaseout of leaded aviation fuel.

Lead in aviation fuel, or Avgas, is an urgent, little-known health crisis. A study last year found that children living in my district in East San Jose have blood lead levels higher than kids had during at the height of drinking water crisis in 2014 in Flint, Michigan. It is a disgrace.

What happens when kids ingest lead from the exhaust fumes of private planes or flight schools near their homes, or lead dust that has settled on surfaces? Airborne lead penetrates deep into the lungs and nasal passages, before crossing into the brain and bloodstream.

Lead poisoning is devastating; it damages every organ system and slowly severs neural connections. Kids struggle with seizures, learning disabilities, and lower IQ. Lead exposure can predict differences in a child’s future income, health, and educational attainment.

Though lead was banned from cars and trucks over 25 years ago, the aging piston-engine aircraft fleet still uses lead. These are mostly hobbyist and private planes, and aircraft for emergency response and flight schools. Sixteen million people in the U.S., including three million children, live within one kilometer of an airport facility that uses Avgas. 600 schools are located within half a kilometer.

One study in Michigan showed starkly how blood lead levels in children rise and fall in in close tandem with local air traffic patterns.

Despite the toxicity of lead, the Federal Aviation Administration and the Environmental Protection Agency have not acted with urgency to phase lead out of aviation fuel.

Viable unleaded alternatives have existed globally since the 1980s, and currently include our witness Chris D'Acosta's company's fuel, 94UL, which is approved for two-thirds of piston-engine aircraft, and common motor gas. Neither of these work for the whole fleet however. Our witness today, Mr. George Braly, has a fuel that he says is commercially ready and can be used by the entire fleet. Even though FAA engineers said the fuel is safe, FAA headquarters have not signed the last piece of paper.

For years, oil companies and aircraft interest groups have worked together to prevent his fuel from getting FAA approval and spread disinformation about its quality. Industry groups appear more concerned about disrupting business as usual than kids getting poisoned.

In recent hearing, the head of the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association expressed opposition to local bans on leaded Avgas, saying, "We are concerned about this terrible precedent that Santa Clara County in California has pursued by preventing the sale of 100 low-lead planes at their two airports."

However, FAA's public-private partnership to phase out leaded fuel by 2030, the EAGLE Initiative, doesn't formally involve the communities that are facing lead poisoning from aviation fuel. The FAA should immediately commit to a faster timeline to reach a lead-free aviation future. They should stop deferring to the corporate greed of powerful industry interests.

And they should help, rather than obstruct communities, that want to ban leaded fuel and bring in innovative alternatives. The FAA just received \$15 billion from President Biden's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law to improve airports. Why not use some of that funding on new infrastructure for unleaded fuel?

The EPA also has a role to play, by ruling as soon as possible that leaded Avgas is a danger to public health and safety. Once that is done, the EPA should work with the FAA to facilitate the phase-out of leaded avgas over a reasonably prompt timeframe.

Quickly phasing out leaded aviation fuels also fits within the broader climate goals of the aviation industry to phase out fossil fuels by 2050, by making aviation cleaner and safer. The FAA and EPA must not repeat past injustices, and should instead exhibit the leadership we need to repair mistakes and protect kids and adults from these toxic fumes.

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