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JOHN McCAIN
ARIZONACHAIRMAN
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COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE,
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United States Senate

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July 12, 2005

Ms. Marion Blakey
Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Avenue, S.W.
Washington, DC 20591
Via Fax: (202) 267-8210Ms. Fran P. Mainella
Director
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
1849 C Street, NW
Room 3112
Washington, D.C. 20240
Via Fax: (202) 208-7889

Dear Administrator Blakey and Director Mainella:

As you know, efforts to preserve the natural quiet of the Grand Canyon have been underway for many years. I have worked on this important issue since coming to the Congress in the 1980s.

The recently announced formation of a Grand Canyon Working Group is an important first step in addressing this crucial issue, and I am pleased that its membership reflects a broad range of interests. It is unfortunate that visitors to the Grand Canyon routinely experience excessive noise from air tour operators. It is my hope that this issue will finally be resolved in the best interest of the public.

I understand the Working Group will hold its first meeting this week, and as such, I wanted to take this opportunity to clarify the intent of Congress regarding commercial aircraft flying at or near cruising altitudes over the Grand Canyon or other national parks.

As one of the co-sponsors of the 1987 "Minimum Altitude for Aircraft Overflying Units of the National Park System Act" (also known as the "National Parks Overflights Act") and

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the lead sponsor of the National Parks Air Tour Management Act of 2000, I can assure you that it was never the intention of the legislative sponsors of either of these laws to regulate commercial aircraft flying at or near cruising altitudes over our national parks.

Both bills were enacted to restore the natural quiet of the Grand Canyon and other national parks through agreements with air tour operators. Low-flying aircraft have had a detrimental impact on visitors' ability to enjoy the Grand Canyon and other national parks; on the other hand, they have provided a unique sight-seeing experience for certain visitors who might otherwise be unable to visit the park. The challenge put to your agencies was to strike a balance between those two competing interests. Please allow me to be clear on this point: commercial aircraft operating at or near cruising altitudes above the parks simply did not enter into this equation.

I trust that the Working Group's efforts will be handled in strict accordance with existing agency rules, regulations, and ethical guidelines and that whatever decision or course of action taken will be made in the best interests of the country.

Again, I wish the Grand Canyon Working Group success in this important effort and hope that the meeting produces meaningful results toward providing a quiet and enjoyable experience for visitors to the Grand Canyon and other national parks.

Sincerely,



John McCain
United States Senate