By BOB GRAVES  
Staff Reporter

"As a nation, we have to decide whether to get serious about supersonic transport development," H. W. Withington said Monday during a colloquium at NASA's Langley Research Center.

Withington, vice president for engineering at Boeing Commercial Airplane Co., said this country will have to face up to the problem of competing in the supersonic age.

Withington was in charge of the supersonic air transport program at Boeing until it was canceled a few years ago. Boeing's costly and controversial SST program was halted mainly because of environmental issues.

He said very promising techniques have been identified in the SST field in the five subsequent years through efforts by government and industry. Productive technical areas were identified as aerodynamics, structures, propulsion and environment.

Withington said significant improvements can be expected in range, fuel consumption and environmental and economic characteristics of a second generation supersonic transport.

He said a lot of component work has been accomplished in SST research and while the pieces look pretty good, until they are put together, the program will not go forward.

"We need a research vehicle," he said. "I don't know how to get it off dead center... it is stalled now."

Withington said current spending is far less than required to develop the improvements for a production program.

Withington told Langley's research scientists tremendous progress has been made in the past 50 years in commercial aviation and there is no reason to believe it won't continue.

But Withington warned ill-considered legislation, or unreasonable regulation, can hurt the industry and offset technology gains. He said some improvements have been made in noise reduction, but further reductions are going to be very difficult. Noise is the critical factor at most of this country's principal airports, he said, and added environmental issues tend to be very emotional.

"The aviation industry is being subjected to extreme pressures by regulatory organizations for continued reduction. We are a very visible industry, and, therefore, vulnerable," he said.

Withington said reasonable profits must be allowed to assure the economic health of the airline industry. It takes about 10 percent for an airline to afford replacement of older airplanes, he said.

Oil wells will be exhausted and jet fuels will run out at some future time, he said, but claimed it is important for the aircraft industry to have its share of current jet fuels as long as possible. Being forced to an alternate fuel prematurely would "really put us in trouble," he said.

"We feel the free world production can continue to meet the needs until the year 2000."