

U.S. Unveils Plan To Ease Air Travel Delay (Chicago Tribune)

Air Travel Delays

**By Mike Dorning
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WASHINGTON--The White House announced measures Friday intended to ease the gridlock that afflicted the nation's air traffic system last spring and summer. The action includes a Web site detailing expected delays.

The initiative stresses more centralized control over the air traffic system and early coordination with airlines in planning responses to severe weather.

Beginning April 3, the Federal Aviation Administration also will begin providing the Web site for travelers with regularly updated information on delay forecasts at major airports.

The site will be www.fly.faa.gov.

Airline officials and industry analysts said it is not yet clear how big an impact the measures would have on an air traffic system that has been struggling to keep up with the rapid growth in travel fostered by the booming economy.

"I think there will be a reduction (in delays). We'll have to wait and see whether it will be significant," said R. John Hansman, director of the International Center for Air Transportation at Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Bob Frenzel, senior vice president for operations of the Air Transport Association, an airline trade association, said: "This is a first step in a process. There are fundamental problems we still have to address. This is going to allow us to make the best use of what we have in place."

Delays surged across the country last year during unusually severe summer weather and difficulties in changing over to a new computer system at critical regional air traffic centers in Chicago and Cleveland.

O'Hare International Airport was especially hard hit, with

29,691 delayed flights between April and August, more than double the number of delays in the same five-month period a year earlier, according to the FAA. Nationally, flight delays were up 36 percent during the same period.

"We had the worst summer last year in terms of delays. It's not a good record for us," said FAA Administrator Jane Garvey. "This is not the silver bullet. We're taking, I think, some immediate, short-term steps. Our long-range answer, clearly, is modernizing the system."

Garvey said any long-term solution will depend on completion of the FAA's \$13 billion air traffic modernization program.

In the past 20 years, attempts to upgrade the air traffic control system have been plagued by cost overruns, missed deadlines, canceled projects and scaled-down goals.

The precise combination of problems that plagued the air traffic system last summer may not recur soon, but they highlighted the weaknesses of a system that remains vulnerable to shocks, said analysts and industry officials.

"The fundamental reason for delay is that the system is close to capacity. It doesn't take much of a perturbation -- a problem with weather, for example--to push a piece of the system over capacity," Hansman said.

The administration's plan, which President Clinton unveiled at a White House ceremony, calls for the national air traffic command center in Herndon, Va., to assume greater authority for responding to disruptions in the air traffic system. Air traffic mostly is run through regional centers, which hand off responsibility for planes to one another as the crafts move across the country.

The FAA has developed more backup plans for altering airport approaches and air routes for severe weather. The new plans should allow controllers to adjust for changing weather in "seconds instead of minutes," said Jack Kies, manager of the national air traffic command center.

The Defense Department also has agreed to allow more civilian planes greater use of restricted military airspace, particularly along the congested Eastern Seaboard. And the FAA plans to make more use of low-altitude airspace in handling severe delays.

In what sounds simple but may be especially difficult in practice, the plan calls for close collaboration among airlines and air controllers in early flight cancellations and rerouting decisions via conference calls every two hours.

"It is going to require a certain amount of discipline and cooperation from the airlines in adjusting their operations," said John Mazur, a spokesman for the Air Line Pilots Association.

The airline industry remains "a brutally competitive" one in which carriers can gain significant tactical advantage through early notification of a competitor's flight cancellations, Hansman said. An airline then can siphon business from a competitor through appropriately arranging cancellations in its own flight schedule.

In the past, carriers sometimes have used the system to "fake out" a competitor and gain advantage.

The FAA has been moving toward earlier and more candid coordination on responses to air traffic problems, with a system of penalties and inducements to encourage good behavior by airlines, Hansman said. But the plans announced Friday represent a significant extension of that.

"Let's not fool ourselves here. This is a plan that we think is going to work, we hope is going to work. But everyone is going to have to do what they say they're going to do," said Capt. Hank Krakowski, director of flight operations control at United Airlines.

The urgency of addressing the delays was underscored by air traffic figures the FAA released earlier in the week.

The FAA reported that 655 million passengers flew on planes in U.S. airspace last year, an increase of almost 100 million in five years. The agency projects the number will reach 1 billion by 2010.

Even though some of the traffic is expected to be accommodated through larger planes, the agency is forecasting the number of jets in the sky will rise by almost 50 percent by 2011.

President Clinton said he is directing the FAA to come up with "a plan for broader reform of the air traffic system" within 45 days.

He also said that legislation Congress is expected to pass within days will provide more money for airport expansions and improvements in the traffic control system.