

## FAA study shows airlines push airports to limit

*By Alan Levin and Jayne O'Donnell, USA TODAY*

WASHINGTON - On a typical nice day at Atlanta's main airport last year, airlines occasionally tried to squeeze in more flights than the airport could handle. About 50 jets can land and take off every 15 minutes at Atlanta's Hartsfield airport, according to the Federal Aviation Administration.

But the airlines, dominated by Delta, tried to get nearly 60 flights in during some 15-minute spans.

The schedule made some flights late, but it allowed Hartsfield to move more passengers than any other airport in the country.

The FAA Wednesday released its first measure of airport capacity throughout the nation, and the report showed that airlines often exceed airports' capacity with their schedules. When weather gets bad, the problem worsens significantly, the study showed.

The report prompted a series of charges and countercharges by aviation interest groups. Some officials rushed to criticize airlines for helping cause delays. Others used the opportunity to call for building more airports and adding runways.

But the question of whether airline schedules are good or bad for travelers is not so simple, aviation experts say.

To be sure, airline scheduling causes some of the flight delays that plague travelers.

After the government lifted the cap in August on traffic allowed at New York's LaGuardia Airport, airlines rushed to add 300 flights a day. The results were delays not seen in the modern history of aviation. The percentage of delayed flights at LaGuardia, 15.6%, was nearly twice that at the nearest airport, Newark International, at 8%.

Airlines compound the problem by scheduling flights to accommodate passengers' preferences to leave and arrive at certain times of the day. At Newark, for example, flights peak sharply at 8 a.m. and 5 p.m., making delays more likely at those times.

But airlines wouldn't be doing their job in a struggling system if they did not press to move as many people as possible, some aviation experts say.

On the day selected for analysis in Atlanta, the airlines tried to move 59 flights from 7:45 p.m. to 8 p.m. The airport can handle only 50 flights in 15 minutes. An additional 52 flights were scheduled from 8 p.m. to 8:15 p.m.

However, the number of scheduled flights dropped off significantly for the rest of the hour. As a result, delays would be few and relatively short. By bringing in those planes, Delta accommodated more people.

This year, Delta altered its schedule to reduce the chances of delays in Atlanta. But most large hub airports have similar peaks followed by quiet periods that allow airlines to catch up if there are delays.

"You want to push the system in order to get the maximum capacity so that there's always a plane available to land and take off," says John Hansman, director of the International Center for Air Transportation at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "If a system is operating right at its maximum capacity, you should have a little bit of delay on your way in or on your way out."

The problem that passengers face is when airlines push too hard. Or when they try to push too many flights into an airport with weather problems.

At San Francisco, for example, delays are rarely a problem when skies are clear. But when fog or low clouds roll in, the number of flights that can land each hour drops from 60 to 30. This occurs 1 day out of 5, the FAA says.

Southwest Airlines found delays there so bad that it moved its operation to Oakland.

Boston faces a similar situation. When skies are clear and the wind is favorable, Logan International Airport can accept 68 arrivals an hour. But when the wind shifts, that drops to 38 arrivals.

This forces airlines to constantly weigh their options. Should they design schedules so that delays rarely occur? If so, thousands of people a day who want to fly could not, while significant runway capacity would go unused.

Conversely, airlines can try to accommodate as many people as possible with the knowledge that on some days there will be bad delays.

"It's not a black-and-white question," Hansman says.

In Europe, most airports are capped at their bad-weather limits. Delays because of airport issues are far less likely, but overall, the system has much less capacity than in this country.

Meanwhile, the FAA is pushing to use new technology and procedures to wring a few more flights per hour out of the system. Most of the major airlines say they have already adjusted their schedules to make delays less likely. At LaGuardia, new limits this year on the number of flights reduced delays.

And nearly everybody in the airline industry favors expanding airports. "We're not going to solve this problem with Band-Aid solutions and approaches with fewer flights or higher costs. The only way to meet the demand is to add runways," says United Airlines spokeswoman Susana Leyva.

Yet new runways are virtually impossible at New York City's three main airports, all of which are among the most delayed in the country.