

Statement of Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison
Commerce Committee Hearing
Inspector General's Report on Airline Customer Service Commitment
February 13, 2001

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I commend Mr. Mead and his staff for issuing a thorough and comprehensive report on the airlines' implementation of their voluntary Customer Service Commitment. As Chairman of the Aviation Subcommittee, the findings presented here will be a valuable resource to me as we consider the critical issues of airline customer service and how to improve our aviation system.

While the Airlines, on the whole, are doing a better job offering customers the lowest fare available, making timely responses to customer complaints and compensating customers for lost luggage, it is painfully obvious that the industry has a long, long way to go in the area of customer service. In particular, air carriers must do a better job of keeping their customers informed about delays and cancellations. This should not be classified information, but the airlines often treat a delayed flight as if it were the Manhattan Project.

I am concerned, however, that the report and its recommendations do not address the underlying cause of air passengers' concerns. Passengers don't want hotel rooms and peanuts as compensation for delays; they want to avoid the delays in the first place.

The report contains shocking statistics on the proliferation of delays and consequent consumer complaints. One in four flights is delayed, and delays of more than one hour at the 30 largest airports are up 165% since 1995. This number is kept artificially low, since airlines are building in more “fudge” time with their flight schedules. Flights that used to take an hour are now supposed to take an hour and twenty minutes, simply because the airlines are trying to minimize the perception of delays.

The airlines are squarely to blame for at least one aspect of the problem. Chronically delayed flights, those flights which are late at least 40% of the time, affect 25 million people annually. Clearly, if a daily flight is late four times out of ten, then something is wrong with the scheduling practices of the airline. Under the current system, however, if an airline takes a flight off the schedule at a popular time, a competitor will simply move into the vacancy, and the competitor’s flight will be chronically late. Obviously, this problem of over-scheduling must be addressed.

Of course, the airlines are an easy target these days. The Federal government must shoulder its share of the blame. We have not kept up with the burgeoning demand for air travel by providing new facilities to increase air capacity. Our air traffic control system is out of date and stretched to its limits. The process for constructing new runways and terminals is byzantine in its complexity and agonizingly time consuming. We have built a mere handful of new runways and only one major new airport in the last decade while the demand for air travel has exploded. These are the real reasons why passengers are dissatisfied, and soft drinks and free tickets are not going to solve the problem. We simply must increase the capacity of our aviation system, or face a major breakdown.

The environmental review process for capital improvements can be measured in decades, not years. In the Chairman's home state of Arizona, Sky Harbor Airport finished a runway in 1999 that it had been trying to build since 1970. It took years to negotiate with the Corps of Engineers and environmental groups because the proposed runway encroached upon a riverbed which had no water in it since 1915. Airports all over the country are facing similar problems from environmental extremists who file lawsuit after lawsuit for no purpose other than to delay, and hopefully kill, a necessary runway or terminal.

I was extremely encouraged by the comments of Secretary Mineta, who has indicated that he is willing to look at ways to streamline the review process. I pledge my support to this effort and I am looking forward to working with him and the Committee to rectify this situation.

After all, it would not be necessary to legislate how airlines treat their customers during long delays if we can do something about eliminating most of these delays before they occur. Passengers don't want a bag of peanuts and free Coca-cola, they want to get to their destination without spending hours in the terminal or on the tarmac.