

STATEMENT OF SENATOR JOHN McCAIN  
CHAIRMAN, SENATE COMMITTEE ON  
COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION  
FULL COMMITTEE HEARING  
ON AIRLINE CUSTOMER SERVICE  
FEBRUARY 13, 2001

- In January of 1999, tremendous attention was focused on airline passenger rights when hundreds of passengers were stuck in planes on runways in Detroit for up to eight and one-half hours. As a result of this episode, and other horror stories, Senator Wyden and I introduced S. 383, the Airline Passenger Fairness Act, a bill cosponsored by Senators Hollings and Rockefeller.
- After a series of hearings, this committee passed S. 383, which had evolved to provide the oversight mechanism for the voluntary Airline Customer Service Commitment agreed to by the Air Transport Association airlines. The bill, which was enacted into law as part of AIR-21, required Department of Transportation Inspector General Ken Mead to audit the airlines' performance of their commitments. As part of their voluntary commitment, the airlines began to implement their individual plans in December 1999.
- C In June of last year, the Department of Transportation IG issued his interim report on how well the airlines were living up to their voluntary customer commitments. At that time, the IG reported mixed results. The airlines were still struggling with aspects of their plans. Some success had been obtained, but the IG's interim report raised serious questions about the adequacy of the airlines' actions to meet the basic standards of customer service. At that time, I committed to wait for the release of the IG's final report before deciding on a further course of action.
- C Yesterday, the IG released the final report on the voluntary Airline Customer Service Commitment. In the report, the IG found that the airlines have made significant inroads on the basic customer service issues to which they committed. I commend the airlines on their efforts. It is clear that they have invested significant amounts of time and money into attaining these goals.
- C However, many argue, and I agree, that what the airlines agreed to in their commitments were merely minimum basic passenger needs. The IG's final report finds that the airlines are still deficient in many of these areas of basic customer service. This causes me great concern. After a year, we are still not in a position where basic customer service needs are being met.

- There are clearly other strains on the aviation system that impair the airlines' ability to provide flights that are not delayed or canceled. Weather, congestion and antiquated air traffic systems cause tremendous system-wide problems. However, bad weather does not cause mishandled baggage and congestion does not prohibit giving timely information on delays. For the record, I find it difficult to believe that the "seamless travel" and "network benefits" touted by airline merger proponents will improve this situation by any degree.
- The broad-ranging, systemic problems facing the industry will be studied by this committee when we look further at the air traffic control system and ways to increase system capacity and inject competition into the market. Today, we are focused on basic passenger needs that should be met in any situation.
- C Mr. Mead has released a concise, thoughtful report with a series of recommendations to further the goals set forth by the voluntary Airline Customer Service Commitment. I, along with Senators Hollings and Hutchison, am prepared to introduce legislation this afternoon to fully implement these recommendations.
- Mr. Mead is with us today to discuss his findings and recommendations. Ms. Hallett is here to discuss the industry response to this report. Thank you both for coming.