

STATEMENT OF SENATOR SLADE GORTON  
CHAIRMAN, AVIATION SUBCOMMITTEE  
SENATE COMMITTEE ON  
COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION  
FULL COMMITTEE HEARING  
ON AIRLINE DELAYS  
SEPTEMBER 14, 2000

In the last few years, airline delays have been increasing at a dramatic rate. Between 1997 and 1999, delays of 15 minutes or more were up 75 percent during the months of April through August. Although final statistics for August are not yet available, every indication is that delays this past spring and summer were worse than last year, especially at the nation's largest airports. Everyone believes that delays will get worse as the demand for air travel continues to grow in the years to come.

It is evident that these delays have played a significant part in the rise in consumer dissatisfaction with air travel. When airline schedules become unreliable, the frustration of passengers is bound to rise. That frustration exacerbates any existing flaws in an airline's customer service program. As a result, Congress gets called upon to address the matter. But more than consumer frustration is at stake.

The costs of these delays are dramatic. The major airlines estimate that delays cost them and their passengers billions of dollars each year. The delays of the past two years portend greater problems in the future. As many have pointed out, the National Civil Aviation Review Commission concluded nearly three years ago that gridlock in the system was fast approaching. To avoid a system continually plagued by gridlock, those of us who have a role in the oversight and upkeep of the national air transportation system must seek out potential solutions for the medium and long terms.

The reasons underlying these delays seem to be as complex as the air traffic control (ATC) system itself. The strong economy has led to an increased demand for air travel, which in turn generates more flights. Although bad weather certainly plays a significant role, the manner in which the FAA responds to potential weather disruptions is also an important factor. I am pleased that the FAA and airlines have been working more closely to manage air traffic when disruptive weather systems are predicted. Government and industry will need to work closely on many levels if the problem of delays is ever to be solved. Also, airport development cannot be forgotten in the effort to accommodate growth in the system.

In an attempt to address some of the concerns associated with ATC management and modernization, Senator Rockefeller and I sponsored legislative provisions that were enacted as part of the recent FAA reauthorization act. Although our ATC management reform proposal is not a panacea, and will not have an immediate impact on delays, we believe that it was a step in the right direction for the long run. Much more needs to be done, however.

Unfortunately, there is no time left in this legislative session for substantial legislation. We must begin a dialogue now that will put us on track to address the deeper problems during the next Congress. An industry consensus will be a prerequisite to any meaningful action. If the aviation community remains divided with respect to solutions, Congress will probably not be able to act in a constructive way. I want to explore with our witnesses what else can be done to address these matters. I appreciate their participation today and look forward to hearing what they have to say.