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CAPTAIN DUANE E. WOERTH, PRESIDENT

AIR LINE PILOTS ASSOCIATION, INTERNATIONAL

BEFORE

THE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE AND TRANSPORTATION

UNITED STATES SENATE

WASHINGTON, DC

SEPTEMBER 14, 2000

THE INCREASING DELAYS IN THE AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL SYSTEM

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Good day Mr. Chairman, I am Captain Duane Woerth, President of The Air Line Pilots Association, International (ALPA). ALPA represents the professional interests of 58,000 pilots who fly for 50 airlines in the United States and Canada. We appreciate the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the very complex issues of flight delays and proposed solutions to the problem.

Let me say at the outset, that all the line pilots of ALPA are grateful to all of you as well to your colleagues in the House for the enactment of AIR 21. Your actions go a long way in providing stable and adequate funding to modernize our air transportation system. As we all know, the air transportation system is dynamic and evolutionary, and so the process of modernizing is also an evolutionary process. The planning, developing and testing of new technologies and equipment, as well as the refining of existing procedures and equipment, has to become a "way of doing business" if the US is to remain the world leader in air traffic control.

The funds provided by AIR 21are an excellent beginning, but since the funding will not be fully realized in the near term, the NAS modernization work will continue to fall further behind. For example, the insufficient appropriation for R& D for FY 2001 and the lead time needed to realize the benefits from the NAS Architecture programs means

that parts of NAS Modernization will be in its current holding pattern for some time. Nonetheless, we hope the funding called for during the life of AIR 21 and the funding that will be authorized in the future leads to the completion of the core NAS modernization projects contained in the NAS Architecture.

At the end of the summer of 1999, the collective thought of the aviation community was that the air traffic control delays could not have been worse and that positive steps needed to be taken to prevent a repeat performance. ALPA believes the FAA took a very positive step with the Spring 2000 Initiative. Without it, things could well have been worse.

Spring 2000 set up a daily collaborative planning process that is designed to allow significantly better response to severe weather situations and other system constraints. Its goal is to deploy the tools and processes that will provide consumers with the predictability, accountability, and reliability they expect from the national air transportation system. The list of technologies and tools in use include Flight Schedule Monitoring, the Collaborative Convective Forecast Product, Departure Spacing Program, Coded Departure Routes, the National Playbook (deals with severe weather reroutes), Military Special Use Airspace Access, and Post Event Tools, to name a few. Many more innovative technologies are under development and their testing and deployment needs to be accelerated.

Spring 2000 is a much-needed tactical approach to managing the National Airspace System on a real-time basis and it is clear that this initiative must be continued indefinitely. We urge that the FAA's Operating budget be increased to fund this new process for managing the daily operation of the system. We expect that the FAA will shortly change the name of this initiative to properly reflect that it is an integral part of the NAS.

The issue of Air Traffic Service delays, and their relationship to system safety, is an issue in which ALPA has a deep and lengthy history of interest. The air traffic control system

has become a convenient target and a scapegoat for much deeper systemic problems. Air traffic control is often blamed for delays it is compelled to implement to maintain the safety of the National Airspace System, but are actually caused by problems outside the control of air traffic.

Keep in mind that delays are merely symptoms or manifestations of larger problems or uncontrollable situations in the National Airspace system. Delays can come from a number of sources, the two most prominent are airspace and airports – although it is in the interfacing of these two elements that seems to produce most delays. The causes of delays are primarily weather, scheduling that is based on optimum weather scenarios, the hub & spoke system, usable runways, and gate availability, among others. With that background I need to point out that there are locations throughout the system that sometimes are at absolute maximum capacity even without the influence of other factors such as weather. When these other external elements are added, the system just collapses.

Was this summer worse than 1999? The eastern third of the nation experienced more severe convective weather (approximately three times the average number of days) this summer, and that was the primary cause of the delays. In addition, the airlines scheduled a record number of flights, which increased the potential for greater delays and cancellations. Our understanding is that while more flights took place, and more passengers were moved, there were a greater number of delays.

It is clear that at certain times on certain days scheduled traffic at the hubs is at absolute capacity. Most of the time Visual Meteorological Conditions (VMC) prevail and airline schedules are based on VMC airport arrival rates. When the weather drops below visual minimums, especially at airports with limited instrument landing capability, the impact begins to ripple through the system. When an airport must restrict use of its runways because spacing or configuration precludes their use under Instrument Meteorological Conditions (IMC), then the airport acceptance rate falls and departure rates are cut. This results in ground delays at departure airports, inbound airborne aircraft holding, and then

ground delays for departures at the arrival airport where planes are waiting to take off – it's like dominos. In the summer thunderstorm season, when severe convective weather activity develops, it often results in airports being closed to all traffic for an extended time. Thus, creating havoc in the system. The Spring 2000 initiative has shown that tactical management can relieve some of the problems, but there is no total solution to mitigating the impact of severe weather, except to not fly into or near it. Maintaining the safety of the system is the guiding principle for all decisions.

We have possibly created a false level of expectation for the flying public by promising that people can fly where they want to, when they want to. To satisfy this demand we have created a scheduling system that allows more aircraft into the same environment at the same time than the system can efficiently handle, even on the best of days. The schedule unrealistically projects everyone into an airport in a one hour time period; everyone tries to get there as early as possible, so the real crunch occurs in a thirty-minute block. Therefore, whenever uncontrollable events like weather occur the system collapses from its own weight.

However, the pressure continues to be put on the ATC system. Recently, it was mandated that the four slot controlled airports permit more flights. Allowing more slots at these airports will aggravate the situation, unless arrival and departures are mandated to the slack periods. However, these times may be less desirable by the travelling public.

Our pilots are every bit as concerned about these delays as are you, and the flying public. We too hear the stories of excessive delays for no apparent reason. These experiences, combined with some of the less than well thought out capacity initiatives the FAA has tried, have only served to reinforce our suspicions that capacity is being emphasized to the detriment of safety. We still have the safest system in the world, but our confidence in it is challenged by what we experience on a daily basis.

Several of the FAA's innovative capacity enhancements have been aimed directly at this aspect of the equation – how can we get more airplanes on the concrete at the same time?

Air traffic control has very specific, safety based, restrictions on runway utilization. These separation standards are designed to ensure the safety of an aircraft and its passengers from other aircraft, and we cannot afford to lessen these standards without full and open testing and evaluation. Capacity critical initiatives must be backed with data that proves that the minimum level of safety is maintained and hopefully enhanced. The FAA clearly has the burden of proof.

Sometimes forgotten, or underestimated and overlooked, is the real impact our punishment based ATC system has on delay potential. With the emphasis by the FAA on disciplinary programs designed to assess blame/fault, rather than educational based programs designed to determine cause and solution to the problem, the FAA has created a built-in delay-producer. The FAA grades itself on the number of controller and pilot mistakes it detects – Operational Errors and Pilot Deviations. The pilot or controller involved is subject to administrative disciplinary action if it is determined they are at fault. Error detection in the enroute portion of the program is automated (Quality Assurance Program, AKA "snitch patch") and there is no discretion available for "no harm, no foul" situations. Because of this, controllers add miles in buffers to existing separation standards to ensure they won't have a "deal." Pilots are equally paranoid and mistrusting of anything the FAA suggests because most of their interface with the FAA is when Flight Standards is pursuing an enforcement case which could result in a suspension of a pilot's license and loss of income. This does not contribute to a healthy environment on either side of the microphone, and results in additional questioning, readbacks and pilot rejection of controller clearances that only serve to further clog the system.

Another significant element of any program truly designed to enhance safety and efficiency is an ability to collect accurate data concerning incidents that occur within the system. The only realistic way to do this is to establish a "no-fault" reporting system for both pilots and controllers. This program must have the objective of investigating for safety purposes – investigate incidents to determine why they happened, and what can be done to ensure they don't happen again. The individuals involved must be able to

participate freely, without fear of repercussions, in order for a system like this to work. Several programs that could be used as models already exist – the American Airlines ASAP program, the NASA Aviation Safety Reporting System, and the US Airways Altitude Deviation Reporting program. A number of airlines are also currently in the process of setting up Flight Operations Quality Assurance (FOQA) programs that are designed to use automated aircraft performance data to improve operational safety and aircraft operating procedures. A program must have integrity and credibility with both the pilots and controllers to be effective. To be able to work on the root causes of deeply imbedded systemic problems it is essential that the program have accurate, safety oriented data to work with. Only through such a program, with guaranteed immunity (from all but intentional rule violations) will we ever be able to identify and correct potentially catastrophic problems.

Environmental concerns have a great impact on the aviation industry. Noise restrictions constrain arrival and departure routes thereby exacerbating the delay problem. The airlines and manufacturers have spent millions of dollars designing newer, quieter aircraft. Pilots are compelled to fly highly complex procedures at less than optimal operational performance standards to comply with ground based constituent concerns. The industry has done all it can do to alleviate these complaints. There must be a paradigm shift in the public to understand that part of the cost of reducing system delays may be the more efficient use of terminal airspace and aircraft performance capabilities – and that may result in an aircraft overflying someone's house. This wholesale acquiescence to environmental concerns may have to be amended if we are to thoroughly address the entire scope of the delay problem.

For example, Phoenix International Airport is the busiest two runway operation in the U.S. but is confined to a single departure stream because the departures on both runways 8 R and L must fly up the dry river bed that is roughly between the two straight-out departure paths. Pilots are required to establish visual separation from the previous departure in order for the departure rate to be maintained at an acceptable level. In normal operations, when there is no weather or other factors causing departure delays, the

airport is forced to operate in a very inefficient manner. When weather is a factor, the delays are compounded and the controllers have no way to expeditiously get the backlog of departures airborne. The delays continue beyond what they should. In reality, the environmental delay is part of the airport's normal operation.

Resectorizartion of enroute airspace can lead to some efficiency gains. Initial evaluation of en route airspace resectorization proposals being touted by a number of potential contractors seems feasible – and they may well be, but not quickly. As with potential fixes to other problems, the technology is available to accomplish resectorization now. In fact, RTCA has Special Committee 192 looking into this concept, among others, to better utilize our national airspace. The recommendations that will be forthcoming from this Committee will result in better management of our scarce airspace resource but will not be possible without allowing the FAA to consolidate facilities and that will require some tough political decisions.

ALPA's motto is Schedule With Safety. We will continue to champion that standard and will work with the FAA and members of the aviation industry to develop initiatives that will improve efficiency, as well as maintain and hopefully improve the safety of air operations. All capacity initiatives must be proven to maintain or increase the safety of air operations and good test and evaluation data is needed to support the implementation of new technologies and procedures. We can accept nothing less.

ALPA's view is that construction of new runways, taxiways, terminals and other infrastructure is equally important, if not more so, than the development of additional ATC capacity initiatives. And, in fact, many of the top 100 airports are planning for new and extended runways and other facilities to create more capacity.

In closing, I want to thank you for giving me this opportunity to address this most complex of topics. This is one of, if not the top priority for ALPA, and you will be hearing much more from us in the future about the need to modernize our National

Airspace System. I would be most happy to answer any question that you and the members of the subcommittee might have.