
December 21, 2007

EDITORIAL

Decongesting the Skies

The Bush administration's remedy for the nation's overcrowded skies, months in the making, correctly zeros in on the New York area where steady and sometimes monumental delays have created flying misery across the nation. The short-term solution includes caps on hourly traffic, which should help. But Washington also needs to aggressively pursue longer-term solutions, chief among them cutting-edge air traffic control systems and relieving congestion on runways and taxiways.

The main feature of the plan, to take effect in March, involves flight caps at Kennedy International Airport — just more than 80 flights an hour at peak times, versus a load that reached 105 flights last summer. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters said that her agency would negotiate limits at Newark International Airport to make sure that traffic is not just diverted there. The caps will be in effect through 2009.

There are reasons to fear putting a cork in a market that is projected to grow 50 percent in the next two decades. Fewer flights could translate into higher fares and less competition, and New York is dependent on business travel and tourism.

That is why transportation officials must accommodate continued growth in air travel. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which runs the airports, recommended no fewer than 100 ideas, several of which federal officials are wisely pursuing. But the administration should do more, starting with a commitment of major investments to meet the future needs of air travel.

Ms. Peters promised on Wednesday to see to it that the New York and Philadelphia flight centers receive the satellite-based system for tracking takeoffs, landings and planes en route. That should have happened long ago. Also welcome is word that New York has moved up on the waiting list for safety-enhancing ground radar. But that still leaves Kennedy at least a year away, and the other two major airports a year or two after that.

The Federal Aviation Administration should charge fair fees to corporate jets, which now benefit from charges based on weight. They carry a minimum number of passengers but use the same air routes as larger commercial planes. And if airlines don't limit their use of small, regional jets between large markets, the government should require it.

What the system has been missing most has been strong leadership, leaving the United States an era behind European air traffic control. The so-called NextGen technology that would replace the 1950s-era equipment in air towers is long years behind schedule. By the time it is finally in place, it, too, will be outdated.

Ms. Peters said she would appoint someone to be responsible for the air traffic over the New York area. That could be a good move if the official has expertise and management skills and is given real authority. The government should also consider expanding the use of military air lanes beyond holidays. For now, the administration deserves credit for not ignoring summer's disastrous delays, for opening debate on a tough issue and for recognizing uncharacteristically that government solutions were the answer to a problem created by free markets.

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
