

Traffic Jam in the Sky

By Patrick Smith

New York Times, December 8, 2007

In case you haven't noticed, flying has become more delay-prone than ever. So far, 2007 has been the most delay-plagued year since the government began keeping records, punctuated by a disastrous summer in which millions of people around the country were stranded. How we got to this point, and what can be done about it, aren't always understood. Step one is acknowledging what the trouble is. Contrary to what the media, industry trade groups and certain politicians assert, there is not an airspace crisis in this country. The problem exists in and around major airports, not along the high-altitude flyways that connect them. We are led to believe that if only our air traffic control system could be modernized, the gridlock would disappear. This is a fallacy.

Yes, our air-traffic infrastructure is underfunded, outmoded and inefficient. Fixing it will indeed pay certain dividends, including shorter flight times, fuel savings, reduced emissions and somewhat better traffic management during inclement weather. Those are good things, but they ignore the fact that a runway can accept only so many arrivals and departures per hour. Ultimately, we are dealing not with an airspace problem so much as a groundspace problem.

Thus it was both puzzling and irritating when, just before Thanksgiving, President Bush announced that several offshore air corridors, usually restricted to military operations, would be opened for civilian use. This "gift to the American people," we were told, would ease congestion during the year's heaviest travel push. An equally relevant option would have been organizing a group prayer or rubbing a plastic airplane for good luck. To begin with, although cabins tend to be fuller during the holidays, the overall number of flights does not change significantly. Even if it did, the benefits of Bush's initiative would have been minimal.

Unfortunately for the airlines, the pressure is on to reduce and/or consolidate flights. They can do this voluntarily, or the government might force them to by imposing caps. For now at least, the industry remains married to a somewhat self-defeating insistence that frequency of flights, more than anything else, is the key to success. Record numbers of people are traveling by air, but they are doing so in smaller planes making more departures. The average jetliner has 137 seats — 23 fewer than five years ago. The use of regional jets, which carry anywhere from 35 to 70 passengers, has increased nearly 200 percent in that span.

At least in theory, regional jets provide a valuable service — connecting small, outlying markets with major cities. The thing is, airlines have taken to using them on mainline trunk routes. Today you can fly from New York to Miami or Houston to Toronto in what we used to call a "commuter plane." At La Guardia and Reagan-National in Washington, regional jets can account for upwards of half of all traffic. During a ground delay at La Guardia last summer, I watched a dozen regional jets taxi and take off in a row.

Of course, it's hard to fault the airlines entirely. After all, this is what passengers say they want. Frequency, if you believe the surveys, sells tickets. People want as many flights to choose from as possible — neglecting to consider only a fraction of them might arrive when they're supposed to.

In the end, it's difficult to say what the answer is. Still, the most important step toward fixing the problem is understanding how not to fix it:

- Modernizing the air traffic control system will have limited impact where it is needed most — in and around airports.
- Because of limited space and enormous price tags, the construction of new runways is all but impossible.
- Encouraging the growth of satellite airports, a common suggestion, ignores the fact that millions of fliers need to transfer and connect at major hubs to get to smaller towns. Moreover, fragmenting a major market into several mini-markets spawns the use of more small planes, and will make the problem worse, not better.
- Charging high landing fees to dissuade peak-period operations is another bad idea. With overall fares so low, costs can easily be passed to consumers.
- The idea of mandatory flight caps for carriers is appealing, but it's fraught with complications and bitterly opposed by the industry. I have little faith in regulators coming up with a means of fairly and equitably imposing restrictions among several competing airlines.

If you ask me, the last best hope is for airlines to better organize their schedules and wean themselves away from their reliance on regional jets. Consider Delta at John F. Kennedy airport in New York. The airline has come up with a plan to spread a number of its evening overseas departures into non-rush hour slots, when the airport is much quieter. That alone will not solve the airport's notorious nightly conga lines, but if together the industry thinks more creatively, things can improve.