



Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-08-934T](#), a testimony to the Subcommittee on Aviation Operations, Safety, and Security, Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Flight delays and cancellations have plagued the U.S. aviation system. According to the Department of Transportation (DOT), more than one in four flights either arrived late or was canceled in 2007—making it one of the worst years for delays in the last decade. Delays and cancellations were particularly evident at certain airports, especially the three New York metropolitan commercial passenger airports—Newark Liberty International (Newark), John F. Kennedy International (JFK), and LaGuardia. To avoid a repeat of last summer's problems, DOT and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) have worked with the aviation industry over the past several months to develop and implement several actions to reduce congestion and delays for the summer 2008 travel season.

This testimony addresses (1) the trends in the extent and principal sources of flight delays and cancellations over the last 10 years, (2) the status of federal government actions to reduce flight delays and cancellations, and (3) the extent to which these actions may reduce delays and cancellations for the summer 2008 travel season. This statement is based on an analysis of DOT data on airline on-time performance, a review of relevant documents and reports, and interviews with officials from DOT, FAA, airport operators, and airlines, as well as aviation industry experts and associations. DOT and FAA provided technical comments which were incorporated as appropriate.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-934T](#). For more information, contact Susan Fleming at (202) 512-2834, or flemings@gao.gov.

NATIONAL AIRSPACE SYSTEM

DOT and FAA Actions Will Likely Have a Limited Effect on Reducing Delays during Summer 2008 Travel Season

What GAO Found

DOT data show that flight delays and cancellations have increased nationwide and especially in the New York region; however, the data provide an incomplete picture of the source of delay. Since 1998, the total number of flight delays and cancellations nationwide has increased 62 percent, while the number of scheduled operations has increased about 38 percent. Flight delays and cancellations in the New York region are even more pronounced. Specifically, since 1998, the number of flight delays and cancellations in the New York region has increased about 111 percent, while the number of operations has increased about 57 percent. DOT data on the sources of delays provide an incomplete picture. For example, in 2007, late arriving aircraft accounted for 38 percent of delays nationwide, but this category indicates little about what caused the aircraft to arrive late, such as severe weather.

To reduce delays and congestion beginning in summer 2008, DOT and FAA are implementing several actions that for the purposes of this review GAO is characterizing as capacity-enhancing initiatives and demand management policies (see table). Some of these actions are already in effect, such as 11 of the 17 short-term initiatives designed to improve capacity at the airport or system level and the hourly schedule caps on operations at the New York area airports. The other actions are being developed but are unlikely to be in effect by this summer. For example, DOT and FAA are soliciting comments on the proposed rule to establish slot auctions at JFK and Newark until July 21, 2008.

DOT's and FAA's capacity-enhancing initiatives and demand management policies may help reduce delay, but the collective impact of these actions on reducing delay in 2008 is limited. For example, the benefit of the 17 initiatives—which range from efforts to reduce excessive spacing on final approach before landing to new procedures for handling air traffic during severe weather conditions—is generally expected to come from the initiatives' combined incremental improvements over time and in certain situations. The demand management policies may have a more immediate but limited effect on delays since the caps at Newark and LaGuardia were set at a level that was generally designed to avoid an increase in delay over 2007 levels. For example, the caps at Newark are set at a level that is not expected to bring a delay reduction as compared to delays in 2007.

Status of DOT's and FAA's Actions to Reduce Delays and Congestion

Action—capacity enhancing initiative	Status
17 short-term operational and procedural initiatives	11 of 17 completed
Coordination for use of military airspace	In progress
New York/New Jersey/Philadelphia airspace redesign	Initiated, estimated completion 2012
New York Airspace Czar	Appointed
Action—demand management policy	
Orders limiting scheduled operations at New York airports	In effect
Proposed rules on slot auctions at New York airports	DOT & FAA are seeking and reviewing comments
Amendment to Airport Rates and Charges policy	Final policy issued July 8, 2008

Source: GAO analysis of DOT and FAA actions.