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B-114898
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Inspection Of Passengers
And Baggage At Airports
And Seaports In San Francisco,
Los Angeles, And San Diego

B-114898

U.S. Customs Service
Department of the Treasury

*BY THE COMPTROLLER GENERAL
OF THE UNITED STATES*

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MAY 3, 1974



COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

B-114898

The Honorable Glenn M. Anderson
House of Representatives

Dear Mr. Anderson:

This is in response to your September 5, 1973, letter which requested that we:

- Investigate procedures and practices of the Customs Service, Department of the Treasury, for clearing passengers debarking from vessels docking at San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego.
- Compare procedures used for the clearing of passengers from abroad at the San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego airports and evaluate why the clearing of passengers from one mode of transportation is superior to the other.
- Make recommendations for (1) expediting the clearance of ship passengers that would aid Customs in carrying out its responsibilities and (2) helping the Congress alleviate any problems in this area.

Customs procedures require the examination, on at least a sample basis, of the baggage of all passengers arriving in the United States. The procedures and regulations are the same for sea and air travelers and all ports, except for the criterion suggested for determining the number of inspectors to be assigned to a specific arrival. In practice the latter criterion, which suggests a lower passenger-inspector ratio to clear incoming vessels than airplanes, was generally not followed at the locations visited.

Generally air passengers are processed faster than sea passengers. Air travelers are processed faster at Los Angeles than at San Francisco, and, conversely, sea travelers arriving in San Francisco are processed faster than Los Angeles

arrivals. The limited number of arrivals at San Diego was insufficient for any meaningful analysis. The following table shows the average processing time at San Francisco and Los Angeles for both means of transportation.

<u>Location</u> <u>(sample size)</u>	<u>Average time</u> <u>to offload</u> <u>baggage</u>	<u>Average time</u> <u>to inspect</u> <u>baggage</u>	<u>Average wait</u> <u>until all</u> <u>passengers</u> <u>were cleared</u>
San Francisco seaport (5)	1 hr.	1 hr. 24 min.	2 hrs. 24 min.
Los Angeles seaport (129)	1 hr. 26 min.	1 hr. 38 min.	3 hrs. 4 min.
Los Angeles airport (186)	11 min.	38 min.	49 min.
San Francisco airport (49)	11 min.	55 min.	1 hr. 6 min.

In our opinion there are two reasons for the variances in the average time required to clear all passengers, of which Customs controls only the first. First, passengers were processed faster when more inspectors were assigned to inspect travelers (lower passenger-inspector ratio). Second, air travelers' baggage is ready for inspection in about 11 minutes as opposed to 60 to 86 minutes for sea travelers. We are making recommendations to the Commissioner of Customs for reducing passenger waiting time at seaports.

Details of our examination follow.

SCOPE OF REVIEW

We (1) observed the offloading of baggage and the processing of passengers through Customs inspection at San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego, (2) interviewed Customs and shipping company officials, (3) examined Customs regulations, and (4) analyzed inspection and baggage-handling statistics. A list of ships and airplanes for which we observed the Customs inspections is enclosed.

Inspection and baggage-handling times were usually not recorded at the San Francisco seaport; however, Customs did record such information for five ships which arrived in San Francisco during our review. For the most part, our comments and comparisons do not include San Diego inspections because of the limited number of ship and air arrivals and the non-availability of records on inspection times there.

CUSTOMS INSPECTION

The average number of monthly international passenger flights and ships carrying more than 29 passengers arriving at the three locations follows.

	<u>Ships</u>	<u>Airplanes</u>
Los Angeles	11	1,157
San Francisco	7	223
San Diego	a1	22

^aDoes not include ferry boat arrivals at San Diego from Ensenada, Baja California, Mexico.

Inspectors are permanently assigned to air passenger baggage inspection at San Francisco and Los Angeles because of the large number of international passenger flights. Air cargo inspectors supplement the crew during peak arrival times. Inspectors are not permanently assigned to passenger duty at the three seaports and the San Diego airport because there are few passengers. Inspectors normally assigned to inspect incoming cargo process these passengers. Occasionally San Francisco airport inspectors help inspect ship passengers but, according to Customs officials, this is not possible at Los Angeles because of the longer distance between the seaport and airport.

At all the seaports and airports inspectors use their judgment in examining some baggage more thoroughly, especially that arriving from (1) countries where drug seizures have been made, referred to as "high risk" flights or ships,

and (2) "free ports" or other areas where experience has shown that a high amount of dutiable articles may have been purchased. At both airports and seaports visited, the percent of bags inspected ranged from 50 to 100 percent. However, we did not detect any major variance in the thoroughness of examinations among the sites.

The only significant procedural difference was the passenger-inspector ratio for varying size passenger loads. Generally, the greater the number of passengers, the greater the number of passengers each inspector had to process. Consequently sea passengers generally wait longer than air passengers to complete inspection because ships normally have more passengers.

Also the more passengers arriving on an aircraft, the longer it took for Customs inspection. This did not hold true for ships. Even though the passenger-inspector ratio at the Los Angeles seaport varied according to the passenger group size, the inspection time was not significantly different. We believe this is attributable to the nature of the voyages. According to local Customs officials, generally ships with fewer debarking passengers have been on longer voyages and the passengers have more baggage and dutiable merchandise. This increases the inspection time required and thereby negates the favorable passenger-inspector ratio.

San Francisco processed sea passengers faster than Los Angeles, and Los Angeles processed air passengers faster than San Francisco.

The passenger-inspector ratios and Customs processing time (excluding baggage-unloading time) for each mode of travel and port for the arrivals reviewed are shown in the following two tables.

Passengers Per Inspector by
Passenger Group Size

<u>Passengers</u>	<u>Seaport</u>		<u>Airport</u>	
	<u>San Francisco</u>	<u>Los Angeles</u>	<u>San Francisco</u>	<u>Los Angeles</u>
All arrivals	19.3	26.7	14.1	10.7
0 to 100	7.8	10.2	9.8	7.8
101 to 200	14.7	16.4	15.0	14.1
201 to 300	22.1	24.0	18.7	22.7
301 to 400	22.8	28.7	21.4	19.6
401 to 500	20.0	36.5	(a)	(a)
501 to 600	(a)	41.6	(a)	(a)
601 to 800	43.4	48.8	(a)	(a)
Average passengers per ship or air- craft	228.0	316.0	154.0	94.0
Average inspectors per ship or air- craft	12.2	11.6	10.2	8.8

Inspection Time by
Passenger Group Size

	<u>Hours</u>			
	<u>San Francisco</u>	<u>Los Angeles</u>	<u>San Francisco</u>	<u>Los Angeles</u>
All arrivals	1.4	1.6	0.9	0.6
0 to 100	(b)	1.7	.6	.5
101 to 200	(b)	1.5	.9	.7
201 to 300	(a)	1.5	1.2	1.1
301 to 400	(a)	1.5	1.6	1.2
401 to 500	(b)	1.7	(a)	(a)
501 to 600	(a)	1.7	(a)	(a)
601 to 800	(a)	1.8	(a)	(a)

^aNo arrivals in this classification in our sample.

^bLimited sample size of five ships was insufficient to make the stratified analysis.

Customs has a nationwide assignment criterion of 1 inspector for every 15 sea passengers and 1 inspector for every 20 air passengers. However, district directors may assign more or fewer inspectors considering the countries from which the flights or vessels are arriving, the nature of the flights (charter or regularly scheduled) or vessels (cruise or transoceanic voyage), the inspection facilities, and the availability of inspectors. Customs officials could not give a study or statistics on which the criterion was established; however, they believe the ratios were arrived at on the basis of experience and the lower seaport ratio reflects the generally greater number of bags and more dutiable articles declared by sea passengers.

Customs must allocate personnel to meet its responsibilities, including law enforcement, collection of duty, and service to travelers and importers. Some ships have 600 or more passengers which, at the prescribed ratio, requires 40 inspectors. According to local Customs officials, the formation of a passenger inspection crew of that size can adversely affect cargo inspections and service to those concerned with moving cargo.

Los Angeles regional Customs officials agreed that the number of inspectors assigned to large passenger ships did not meet the assignment criterion. They proposed to see if temporary "on call" employees at Los Angeles International Airport, could also be used to inspect passenger ships. We believe this would decrease inspection time at the Los Angeles seaport.

According to Los Angeles and San Francisco Customs officials, the inspection time differences between sea and airports are also influenced by tables on which bags are examined. The airports have permanent tables with electric conveyer belts for moving luggage to inspectors; however, seaport inspection tables are not as sturdy and luggage must be moved by hand along the tables. This is important because sea passengers generally have more and bigger baggage than air travelers.

We could not measure how different types of tables affected inspection time. However, the passenger-inspector ratio remains the most important factor in inspection time variances, and the different tables were not a major factor.

BAGGAGE HANDLING

Incoming passengers are likely to attribute their entire wait to Customs inspection delays, even though baggage handling, which Customs does not control, accounts for a great deal of waiting time, especially at seaports. According to shipping and Customs officials, the sea passenger is much more comfortable than the air passenger while awaiting Customs inspection. Shipboard meals are usually arranged so that half the passengers are sitting down to breakfast while the other half are processing through Customs. Even if breakfast has been completed or the ship does not arrive at a mealtime, the passengers remain on board in comfortable surroundings while the baggage is being handled. In contrast, air passengers have to wait for their luggage and their turn for inspection in crowded baggage areas after long hours in flight.

The average wait between arrival and completion of Customs inspection is longer at seaports. For the arrivals reviewed, baggage offloading consumed about 45 percent of this time at the seaports but only about 20 percent at the airports.

Baggage-handling time is longer at seaports because (1) sea passengers have more and bigger luggage and (2) baggage handling is not mechanized. The baggage is handled piece by piece and by hand. After coming off the ship onto the dock, it is loaded on small handcarts, pushed into the Customs inspection area, taken off the carts, and arranged alphabetically or by color code. By contrast, air travelers' luggage is rapidly transported directly to the inspection area and randomly offloaded onto a baggage carousel.

Customs inspection normally begins at the three seaports when all baggage has been offloaded and placed in the Customs area. This procedure is by mutual consent of Customs and

shipping company officials because of potential passenger confusion and congestion while trying to locate baggage before it has been completely offloaded. When all the baggage has been offloaded, some passengers are let off the ship to locate their luggage and proceed to the inspection tables.

Sea passenger waiting time could be shortened if baggage belonging to the first passenger group could be offloaded first and Customs inspection started while the remaining baggage is offloaded.

Customs officials expressed support for an orderly system which would allow inspection of ship passengers to begin earlier so that inspection personnel could return to cargo duty. At the San Diego seaport, Customs officials tried the proposed system and believed it shortened passenger waiting time. Although the shipping companies appear eager to expedite the offloading of baggage, they expressed some reservations about administrative burdens which could be encountered and the possible need for hiring more stevedores to implement the system.

In two other aspects of passenger processing, shipping companies were reluctant to incur additional costs. In one case a ship arriving in Los Angeles was delayed for more than 20 minutes because the shipping company would have incurred extra labor costs if baggage unloading had started before 8 a.m. At Los Angeles only one ship uses the one modern passenger terminal having mechanized baggage handling. The other shipping companies prefer to avoid rental costs at this pier by using antiquated passenger terminals which are in their already leased cargo facilities.

INTERREGIONAL INFORMATION EXCHANGE

The San Francisco and the Los Angeles regional Customs offices exchanged very little information regarding inspection and operating procedures. Customs officials interviewed

had not visited other regions to compare operational methods in order to improve operations. Both offices said they had previously recommended these exchanges to Customs Headquarters but to no avail.

Three operational differences between the two regions might have been identified and resolved under an exchange program. We believe these differences demonstrate the need for such exchanges and the potential for obtaining more efficient and effective use of Customs personnel.

First, the Los Angeles office had at least one man comparing passenger declarations with the ship passenger manifest as travelers left the inspection area to make sure all passengers were inspected and that none had remained on the ship to avoid inspection. In contrast, the San Francisco office waited until all the passengers had left the inspection area to make this check. If Los Angeles adopted the San Francisco procedure, employees used for making the check could be used for inspection duties; this would reduce passenger waiting time. Los Angeles regional Customs officials agreed to adopt the procedure used in San Francisco.

Second, the two regions used different systems of baggage control at the seaports. After inspection at Los Angeles, baggage is taken directly from the baggage area and cannot be mixed with baggage awaiting inspection. The inspection area in San Francisco was arranged so that, after inspection, passengers must take their bags through the uninspected luggage area. Under these circumstances, San Francisco has to stamp each bag after inspection and employ a man at the gate to check that each bag has been stamped. At our suggestion, San Francisco Customs officials tried the Los Angeles system on the next several inspections and found it superior.

Third, an inspector is used as a cashier for collecting duty at the San Francisco seaport. By contrast, the Los Angeles seaport inspectors individually collect duty, in most cases, from passengers and then turn over the funds after the inspection period. Discussions between the regions

might identify which system is more efficient and could be adopted at both seaports.

CONCLUSIONS

Because inspector staffing patterns were inconsistent for different locations and modes of travel, inspection times were unequal. In addition, staffing patterns for ships with a large group of passengers were not in accordance with Customs criteria.

Baggage handling at the seaports, which is not under Customs control, was inefficient and caused sea passengers to wait longer than air passengers for inspection. However, baggage-handling improvements would lessen seapassenger waiting time. Also, the operational differences between regions may cause inefficiencies in passenger processing.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE COMMISSIONER OF CUSTOMS

We recommend that the U.S. Customs Service:

- Because of disparities between the staffing criteria and actual practices at the airports and seaports visited, determine the action necessary to provide the number of inspectors required to process international travelers arriving at different locations and via different modes of travel through Customs in about the same amount of time.
- Encourage shipping companies to establish baggage-handling systems which will allow earlier commencement of inspection, to reduce passenger waiting time.
- Encourage interchanges between regions to identify opportunities for improvement.