

NPRM Comment:

Response to Docket No. FAA-2004-19411, Proposed Reservation System For Unscheduled  
Arrivals at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport

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In a NPRM published October 20, 2004, the FAA proposes the implementation of a reservation system restricting the number of arrivals by unscheduled aircraft at the nation's busiest airport, Chicago's O'Hare International. This reservation system would limit unscheduled arrivals to no more than 4 per hour, during the peak hours of 7:00 a.m. to 8:59 p.m. Central Time, effective November 1, 2004 through April 20, 2005. Under this system, reservations would be issued on a first-come, first-serve basis, with reservations available beginning 72 hours prior to the proposed time of arrival (FAA, 2004). This measure is intended to reduce delays at O'Hare, which have been affecting the entire air traffic system. This paper will review the traffic congestion problems at O'Hare and will show that the proposed reservation system is an unfavorable solution.

Background

Traffic congestion and delays at O'Hare International are nothing new; the airport is notorious for it. According to Alan Levin's report in *USA Today* (2004), similar delay problems plagued the industry prior to September 11, 2001. The drastic reduction in air traffic following that tragedy temporarily reduced the problem. However, traffic congestions and delays at O'Hare have recently grown to record highs. The effects of these delays are spread through the entire airspace system, creating "substantial inconvenience to the traveling public" (FAA, 2004, p. 2).

Levin (2004) states that the recent spike in delays at O'Hare began when American Airlines increased flights into O'Hare on November 1, 2004. This prompted United Airlines to

increase their flights into O'Hare to remain competitive in the market. The schedule expansion by these two airlines resulted in more operations than the airport could handle (Levin, 2004).

The record delays forced FAA Administrator Marion Blakey to call for schedule reductions, mainly from American and United Airlines, which control nearly 90% of O'Hare's flights. Levin notes that similar volunteer reductions had been requested from these airlines in March and June, but the effects were marginalized by Independence Air's schedule expansion (Levin, 2004). After discussing the issue with the airlines, Administrator Blakey issued an order, dated August 18, 2004, which temporarily limited scheduled arrivals to 88 per hour during peak hours. This limit was set with the assumption that 4 additional unscheduled arrivals could be handled during each hour (FAA, 2004). The reservation system proposed by the NPRM is intended to keep unscheduled operations within that allowance.

### Critique

While the justification for the reservation system seems sound, the system will cause many problems in practice. The FAA defines unscheduled flights as "those flights that are not published in the Official Airline Guide (OAG)," including general aviation, military flights, air taxi, and some charter operations (FAA, 2004). As stated in the NPRM, the FAA believes that operators of unscheduled flights have "considerably more discretion and flexibility than scheduled operators in terms of the flight planning horizon and arrival time" (FAA, 2004). They propose that unscheduled flights can easily adjust their arrival times or go elsewhere with little consequence.

National Air Transportation Association (NATA) Vice President Eric Byer accurately describes this position as demonstrating "clear ignorance of the appeal of the on-demand nature of the general aviation industry." The whole point of on-demand operations is to get someone

where and when they need to be. For most corporate users of private aircraft, changing arrival time or destination would be inconvenient and costly. The system would also negatively impact the ability of charter flights to bring passengers to O'Hare for airline flights (Byer, 2004). Just because a flight is unscheduled does not mean that the proposed arrival time or destination is inconsequential or easy to change.

The 72-hour reservation restriction is especially concerning. Only allowing landing reservations to be requested three days prior to the proposed arrival time makes scheduling difficult. Flights arranged more than 72 hours in advance can't be guaranteed to make the planned arrival time. The uncertainty of the arrival time makes planning meeting and other events difficult for passengers of unscheduled flights. As Ronald Priddy (2004) pointed out, the 72-hour reservation restriction is especially difficult for public charter operations, which are planned and approved by the Department of Transportation far in advance and are difficult, if not impossible, to alter.

The proposed restriction to general aviation activity at O'Hare is especially concerning given the limited availability of reliever airports close to downtown Chicago. This situation was worsened last year by Chicago Mayor Daley's illegal destruction of Meigs Field. As the National Business Aircraft Association (NBAA) pointed out in a press release (2004), the destruction of Meigs forced more than 20,000 annual aircraft operations to use O'Hare and Midway International. Limiting unscheduled operations at O'Hare will only shift more traffic to Midway, which has traffic congestion issues of its own.

Despite the flaws in the reservation system, several airline groups argue that the reservation system is the only way to make the FAA order capping operations effective. Paul McGraw (2004), writing on behalf of the Air Transport Association (ATA), argues that since all

users impact scheduling, all users should contribute to the solution. He argues that scheduled carriers have already made schedule adjustments, and that it is only fair to expect other operations to make adjustments as well (McGraw, 2004). However, the reservation system is far from fair. Airlines were asked to reduce their schedules due to traffic congestion that they themselves were primarily responsible for. The competitive schedule expansion, primarily by United and American, led to the spike in delays that prompted FAA action. Since unscheduled flights only account for approximately 1% of O'Hare's operations, their contribution to traffic congestion is negligible when compared to that of the airlines. Furthermore, the "fairness" of the reservation system is questionable, considering that airlines, while operating at reduced schedules, still have guaranteed access to the airport. Under the reservation system, this would not be the case for unscheduled operators. As Byer notes, the proposed reservation system demonstrates the FAA's "blatant favoritism toward scheduled air carriers" (2004).

### Conclusion

There is no denying that there is a very real problem at O'Hare International Airport. Traffic congestion and flight delays have risen dramatically and are hurting the entire aviation system. Clearly, something needs to be done, and the FAA is right to pursue solutions to this problem. However, the proposed reservation system is flawed, and will negatively affect many businesses and individuals. Based on the FAA's statements concerning the flexibility of unscheduled operators, and the 72-hour reservation restriction, it is clear that the FAA has not carefully considered the economic impact to non-airline users. The proposed reservation system is unnecessary, unfair, and inappropriately favors scheduled airlines. Therefore, the FAA needs to abandon this proposal and consider a different solution to the problems at O'Hare.

## References

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