

Fewer Planes, but Not Fewer Delays



Jodi Hilton for The New York Times

Air traffic controllers at Boston's Logan International Airport. Despite the efforts of large airlines to cut costs by grounding planes, traffic has increased at most of the nation's top airports.

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WASHINGTON — With airlines grounding planes because of fuel costs, there will be fewer planes in the sky. Logic suggests passengers could hope for fewer delays.

But the Federal Aviation Administration cautions that air traffic lanes will continue to be full in air space that is normally crowded.

The reason is that the airlines will contract their flying schedules in less-busy cities, which never had much congestion to begin with, and landing slots at busy airports will, for the most part, continue to be fully used, FAA officials say. After all, big airports are the places where airlines can fill up big planes.

“We’re going to see the concentration of large operators at the large airports,” said Michael J. Sammartino, director of system operations at the FAA’s Strategic Command Center in Herndon, Va.

Even so, the agency plans a variety of new steps to reduce delays, relying on new technologies and procedures.

Traffic at the top 35 airports was up 1.5 percent from October through April, compared with the same period a year earlier.

As always, the pattern among airports was mixed; Seattle-Tacoma was up 13.9 percent; San Francisco, 9 percent; Orlando, 8.4 percent; Reagan National Airport in Washington, 8.3 percent; and Charlotte, N.C., 7 percent. Two historically congested airports, Kennedy Airport and Newark Liberty, showed increases of 5.1 percent and 1.1 percent, respectively. But Boston's Logan was down 3.6 percent; Pittsburgh, 3.4 percent; and Chicago's O'Hare, 3 percent.

Not everyone agrees that traffic will stay strong at the big airports. The cuts will ripple through some of the country's biggest hubs, said Joseph P. Schwieterman, a professor at [DePaul University](#) and an expert on air transportation.

"Some airports will see a double-digit percentage decline in flights by late fall," he added, though most of the cuts are **likely to occur during off-peak flying periods**. "All the airlines haven't played their hands yet, but at \$130 fuel I don't think there's much doubt" that there will be steep cuts in service.

The cuts will not be permanent, some industry experts say. "The reduction in service domestically is a short-term phenomenon," said Aaron J. Gellman, a professor of management and strategy at [Northwestern University's](#) Transportation Center.

"This is partly based on the belief that fuel prices will come down and economic growth will become quite vigorous again," he said. "There's a market out there to be served. I don't think the airlines will fail to do so."

In New York, the big change is probably not in the volume of flights, but in caps imposed by the FAA on the number of landings and takeoffs that can be scheduled per hour at Kennedy and Newark. The busy time now starts earlier in the day, and the total number of flights may rise, according to the FAA and the [Port Authority of New York and New Jersey](#).

With the old system of peaks and valleys in the level of operation, controllers could use a normally quiet time to clear out a backlog; now there are no normally quiet times. The result, said Nancy B. Kalinowski, vice president of the FAA's Air Traffic Organization, is that "a good day should be good, but a bad day will be horrid."

Port Authority officials say delays at New York-area airports have varied independently of the level of operations, and they are not sure that thinning out the traffic will reduce delays.

"I don't get the level of delay we're getting now," said William R. DeCota, executive director of aviation at the Port Authority. The Port Authority opposed the flight caps imposed by the FAA

The FAA, though, says the caps will help smooth out the traffic flow. It has a variety of other changes in place, in New York and elsewhere, to cut delays. Ms. Kalinowski says that "2008 is going to be different from the summer of 2007. I'm not going to use the word 'hoping.' We are planning for it to be different."

To speed up traffic, the FAA is opening new routes for jets that are equipped with satellite navigation. The routes are separated by 8 to 12 miles — close by traditional standards but a lot of space if the plane's location is more precisely known.

Those routes are over land, and the agency has taken a parallel step over the Atlantic, adding paths that airliners equipped with satellite navigation can follow from the New York area to the Caribbean. Planes flying over water, where there is no radar, used to be separated laterally by 90

miles; now they are separated by 50. **Planes flying over the United States -- where there is radar -- are separated by only 5 miles at cruising altitude, flying at 400 to 500 knots; and by only 2.5 miles near airports, where speeds range from 400 to less than 100 knots and aircraft are rapidly changing altitude.**

The FAA will also borrow space off the Atlantic coast from the military this summer, as it did last Thanksgiving and Christmas, but it plans a more sophisticated approach, **with pre-assigned routes**, which will make it easier for airlines to plan their flights. The FAA also plans to make requests from the Pentagon longer in advance, on the basis of forecasted thunderstorms.

The agency has also adopted “dispersal headings” for planes departing from Newark and Philadelphia. Planes leaving those airports will peel off in different directions earlier in their flights, allowing more departures each hour.