

STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE DONALD D. ENGEN, FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATOR, BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS, SUBCOMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION, CONCERNING THE AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL SYSTEM. SEPTEMBER 7, 1984.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to appear before you today to discuss the state of the air traffic control (ATC) system and our plans to improve the system.

One of the concerns we share about air travel today is the problem of delays in the system. Delays for the first 7 months of 1984 are up 80% over those for the same period last year. This has generated a lot of publicity and, quite naturally, consternation among air travellers. I want to assure you that we are working diligently to try to alleviate this problem.

FAA recently convened a "Think Tank", a group of about 40 representatives of commercial, general, and military aviation, along with our own experts to examine the issue. Three days of study and discussion led to a better understanding of the causes of delays and a number of specific recommendations to solve the problem. I should point out that one of the causes of delays is something which we would not want to change--the nationwide economic recovery which has stimulated an unprecedented demand for air travel. The airlines will seek ways to meet that demand. The FAA must provide the means for them to do that.

Other factors which have an impact on delays are limitations on the ground, which include runways, taxiways and gates; computer capacity; air traffic staffing; weather; and airline schedules. FAA can, to some extent, affect limitations on the ground through funding made available under the Airport Improvement Program (AIP). However, we must rely on local and state governments to play a major part in this effort. A significant problem in this area in recent years has been the lack of new airports or the prospect of constructing new ones--Dallas-Fort Worth is the last major airport which has been built and it is now 10 years old--coupled with an increasing trend to limit capacity at existing airports through curfews and impediments to airport expansion. Among the impediments cited by the Office of Technology Assessment report on Airport System Development are inadequate land availability, opposition by local communities, noise problems, and high capital costs.

We, of course, have more control over computer capacity, and air traffic controller staffing. Although we are working on increasing computer capacity through implementation of the National Airspace System (NAS) Plan, computer capacity has not been a limiting factor this summer. The Subcommittee is already quite familiar with this program through your review during the appropriations process. I would highlight here the critical importance of our Fiscal Year 1985 funding for

Facilities and Equipment in order to obtain the necessary computers. The support of the Senate and House is appreciated, although there appears to be reason for concern about the prospect of a Continuing Resolution. As you know, the NAS plan is proceeding apace, and will provide long term capacity improvements.

One of the NAS Plan improvements, the Microwave Landing System (MLS), is moving into the implementation phase and will introduce a new era in the capabilities for approach and landing. However, we need short term solutions to address the immediate problem of delays, before the improvements from MLS will be felt in the system. Beginning in early 1986, 208 MLS systems will be installed over a 3-year period. The underlying goal of providing an all-weather capability for essentially all IFR-equipped airports is now within reach and by the end of the decade all-weather operations should become routine. We expect 1250 MLS systems to be in operation by the year 2000. MLS supports the goals of the NAS Plan for safety, capacity, productivity, and economy in the approach and landing function, and to support the growth of aviation well into the next century.

In terms of staffing, we are currently at 88% of our goal of 6,627 operational controllers in the terminals, and 83% of our goal of 5,085 operational controllers in the en route centers.

We have 1,904 controllers in various stages of training in the developmental pipeline. There is no way to hasten the development of our controllers, however. FAA asserted at the time of the strike that we would maintain our stringent training standards in order to ensure the safety of our ATC system, and we have maintained those standards.

As our current workforce becomes more experienced, we expect productivity to increase, and as more trainees become qualified, we should begin to see some improvement at those facilities which were hardest hit by the strike. We are reviewing our daily flow control restrictions, such as minimum in-trail separation, implemented to provide an added safety buffer as a result of experience level and numbers of controllers. However, in-trail restrictions are less of a constraint than runway capacity. I am personally reviewing the current target we have set for the number of controllers needed to handle air traffic. If I find that, due to increased traffic projections or other reasons, the number should be increased, I will not hesitate to ask the Congress, and this Subcommittee in particular, for more controller positions.

Two of the factors I mentioned affecting delays have historically been beyond the control of the FAA. The first, weather, will always be beyond our control. Perhaps, in the future, we may be able to improve system capacity in bad

weather, or refine our capability to predict the weather, but the fact remains that bad weather reduces the capacity of an airport, for safety reasons. Perhaps less obviously, adverse weather in the airspace of an en route center can have a significant effect on air traffic even at airports where the weather is clear. This is especially true of thunderstorms in the summertime. As an example, on August 30, the nation was hit by a line of thunderstorms over Pennsylvania, Ohio, and New York that at one point stretched from the Canadian border down to Tennessee. Planes flying east or west could not get through the storm, so flights backlogged quickly at airports such as O'Hare, National, and the New York airports. The problem became compounded at O'Hare because there wasn't enough ground capacity to handle the arriving flights from the west coast (which did not encounter any weather problems) because the flights trying to go east from O'Hare couldn't take off. Thus, a ground delay program for the west coast flights had to be implemented, even though the weather from the west coast to O'Hare was fine. Moreover, the weather at most of the affected airports in the east and midwest was clear--it was just the weather in between them that was the problem. Hundreds of airline flights throughout the country were thus adversely affected by this line of thunderstorms.

In all, 60% of the delays of 15 minutes or more from January to August of this year have been due to bad weather. For the

comparable period in 1983, bad weather caused 51% of all such delays, and for 1982 the figure was 32%. Conversely, the percentage of delays of 15 minutes or more due to center flow management programs to control en route center traffic volume was only 14% for the first 8 months of 1984, while it was 20% for the same period in 1983, and 61% for 1982. So you can see that bad weather accounts for a significant portion of the delays we have been experiencing this year.

The second factor which has been beyond our control, airline scheduling, is something the FAA is prepared to adjust, if the airlines are not able to work out a satisfactory solution to the problem among themselves. Specifically, the problem is that many carriers, desiring to serve the public, want to serve certain airports at certain times--Atlanta Hartsfield at 8 o'clock in the morning, JFK at 4 p.m., Denver Stapleton at 10 a.m. The problem is exacerbated by the practice of hubbing, whereby a carrier tries to get a large number of flights into a specific airport within a particular timeframe, so that passengers can change to connecting flights scheduled to leave within a short time. This is a perfectly rational way for airlines to want to run their businesses, to provide maximum opportunities to their customers. However, it has led to a number of scheduling anomalies, many of which have been widely reported in the media.

Quite obviously, the number of planes scheduled to land at certain times at these airports so greatly exceeds the capacity of runways and taxiways that it would be physically impossible to land them all in those time periods. And no additional amount of controllers is going to increase the number of planes that can land at these airports. Airlines know that these schedules cannot be met, and that "delays" will therefore inevitably occur, yet they all want to be able to advertise a flight that arrives at these times. The same is true for departure scheduling.

The Notice of Proposed Rulemaking FAA published on August 20th proposes to have the agency prescribe minute-by-minute arrival and departure limits for selected time periods at six congested airports: Atlanta, Denver, O'Hare, LaGuardia, Kennedy, and Newark. This would entail the apportionment of the available runway capacity for those specific times, and the agency would set up a process for fairly distributing the available opportunities to carriers, as we did at the pacing airports under the interim operations plan.

However, we at FAA would much rather have airlines work out the scheduling arrangements themselves, without the need to adjust schedules by regulation. As you are no doubt aware, Mr. Chairman, such voluntary discussions about adapting schedules require a grant of antitrust immunity by the Civil Aeronautics

Board (CAB). Eastern Airlines petitioned the Board for such immunity, and the Departments of Transportation and Justice, as well as a number of other carriers, filed comments in support of that petition. Pursuant to the CAB grant of immunity issued last Friday, FAA held the first "demand management" meeting beginning last Wednesday, September 5th. We expect the meetings to produce an acceptable solution to the scheduling problem. If not, however, the FAA is prepared to act through its regulatory authority. As described, any regulatory action taken would be strictly tailored to the extent and location of specific airport delay problems. The FAA is not in the business of economic regulation, and a return to the restrictive practices of the past would not solve the short term airport delay problems that we face in any case.

I might point out that the action FAA has taken in calling the "demand management" meeting is consistent with the recommendations on demand management by the government-industry Think Tank. The group urged FAA to hold such a meeting and take the necessary regulatory action to implement the resulting scheduling changes so that demand better matches system capacity. The Office of Technology Assessment in its recent report "Airport System Development" also alludes to the desirability of considering demand management.

In addition to the recommendations concerning demand management, the Think Tank also recommended closer FAA/Industry collaboration, including the establishment of local think tanks in areas experiencing the most congestion and delays. We believe this is a sound idea, and expect to convene the first of these groups this month.

The Think Tank also recommended a number of changes in air traffic procedures to gain incremental increases in system capacity. We are studying a number of the recommendations, and if we can implement them without compromising safety, we will do so. If we can't, we won't. However, I should caution you that even if all of the recommended air traffic procedures were implemented, we would expect only modest increases in capacity.

Another recommendation, which is in the process of being implemented, is the centralization of air traffic control operational authority under the Associate Administrator for Air Traffic. This will give expanded responsibility to our Central Flow Control Facility in Washington, which will better enable us to make efficient use of available capacity throughout the ATC system, help reduce congestion and delays, and make the system more responsive to users.

In terms of controller staffing, I assure you I am taking action both to increase current staffing and to retain our experienced workforce, Mr. Chairman. One source of expertise during the rebuilding period has been our reemployed controller annuitants. I would like to acknowledge your recognition of the benefits of retaining these experienced controllers which led you to add to the Supplemental Appropriations bill the provision extending for a year the opportunity for our reemployed annuitants to receive full salaries along with their retirement benefits. This has recently been signed into law by the President, and we appreciate your efforts in the enactment of that provision.

That concludes my statement, Mr. Chairman. At this time, I would be pleased to respond to your questions.