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The Travails of Air Travel

The busy summer travel season is around the corner, and, once again, the nation's strained aviation system will be put to the test. The system is not expected to fare well unless airlines, airport authorities and federal transportation officials work together to buffer passengers from the immediate problems and to build the runways and traffic control systems that could provide a long-term solution.

The fundamental problem — the system's inability to cope with demand — is in many ways a tribute to the success of the deregulation of the airline industry. Americans are flying more often and more safely than ever before, and paying less to do so. More than 670 million passengers flew on United States airlines last year, 50 percent more than in 1990, and the number is expected to surpass one billion in 2010.

This explosion in demand has overwhelmed the system in recent years. Airlines have largely kept up, but the public aviation infrastructure has not. Airlines have bought new aircraft to carry passengers when and where they want to go, but major airports and the federal government have failed to build needed new runways and to upgrade air traffic control technology in a timely fashion. Flying, consequently, has become one of the most predictably annoying aspects of American life.

Because the airlines have increased their own capacity, they feel as victimized by the gridlock as passengers do — whether the problem is having to wait after landing for a gate to clear or being 25th in line to take off. The industry estimates that delays attributable to the air traffic control system, as opposed to weather, cost airlines and their passengers some \$6 billion a year in lost productivity. Even small delays can reverberate through the system. A recent study showed how, on a typical day last June, 5 to 15 minutes of unplanned holdings in the air for 15 flights bound for Newark affected some 250 aircraft throughout the system within 20 minutes, some as far west as Minneapolis.

While bemoaning the system's failure to meet

their needs, airlines have exacerbated the problem and allowed their customers to suffer the consequences. They tend to schedule new flights at congested airports at times when there is no more capacity, virtually guaranteeing that flights will take off late. While improving service in a number of other areas, airlines continue to get low marks for keeping passengers informed about delays and for taking care of those stranded overnight.

The nation's airlines should accept the fact that a meaningful increase in the system's capacity remains a few years away and plan accordingly. The Bush administration, for its part, must seek ways to expedite the building of new runways and to install satellite-based navigational systems that will effectively free planes from having to stick to narrow pathways in the sky.

There are some heartening signs that airlines may be starting to assume responsibility for their customers in this strained environment. This month, Delta evened out its schedule at its Atlanta hub, shifting some flights from peak hours in an effort to offer more realistic and more reliable schedules. We hope airlines will likewise be receptive to efforts at La Guardia and at other congested airports to ration landing slots as the scarce commodities that they are.

The prospect of paralyzing strikes poses an additional threat to the system this summer. Northwest Airlines and its mechanics have reached a tentative deal, but tough labor negotiations are still in progress at Delta, United and American. Delta's pilots could go on strike as early as April 29.

Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta has predicted that travelers will experience fewer delays this summer. He is counting on coordinated air traffic control efforts between the airlines and the Federal Aviation Administration to deal more nimbly with delays. Shortly after being confirmed, Mr. Mineta said that airports, airlines and air traffic control are the sun, the moon and the stars of the aviation system, and that they are out of alignment. Aligning them must be his top priority.