

The crowd up high

by *The San Diego Union-Tribune*

For air travelers, chances are good that this summer will be the worst ever for delays, surpassing the dismal record set last year, which was worse than the year before. In fact, on-time arrivals at the country's busiest airports have steadily deteriorated since 2002. Last year, the on-time arrival rate dropped to 75 percent; the figure is likely to be even lower for 2007. The reason for this is not the enhanced security measures imposed after the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks. Rather, the principal cause of delays is the nation's overburdened air traffic control system, which relies on antiquated radar-based technology from the 1950s.

About 85 percent of late take-offs and arrivals are due to air traffic control congestion. The system is rapidly approaching gridlock both in the skies and on the ground, just as an overcrowded freeway causes traffic to gradually grind to a standstill. The U.S. Department of Transportation estimates that avoidable air traffic control delays already are costing the American economy \$10 billion a year.

Today, the U.S. air traffic control system is strained by 750 million passengers a year. The volume is expected to hit 1 billion by 2015, and 1.5 billion by 2025. Much of this passenger growth is expected to come from a new generation of "VLJs," or very light jets, which will add considerably to air traffic congestion on runways throughout the country.

Unless steps are taken to modernize air operations and make them more efficient, primarily through a transition to satellite-based navigation, the relentless increase in both commercial and private aviation will soon overwhelm the current air transport infrastructure.

There is broad agreement throughout the industry and the federal government that a sweeping upgrade of the air traffic control system is needed. Indeed, beleaguered airline executives argue that American carriers would be the most profitable in the world if the air traffic control problems were fixed. But Bush administration efforts to move forward have been stymied by sharp disagreements over who should pay for the improvements, which could cost as much as \$22 billion between now and 2025.

The Federal Aviation Administration's current tax system, which relies on ticket levies, fuel taxes and fees paid by airlines and some private aviation, will expire on Sept. 30. This deadline exerts pressure on Congress to act on the modernization plan when it reauthorizes the FAA tax system and the agency's budget for the new fiscal year, which begins on Oct. 1.

To pay for the needed technology upgrades and capacity expansion, the Bush administration proposes a hybrid financing plan that would reduce passenger ticket fees but boost user levies and fuel taxes paid by airlines. The most controversial aspect of the administration's plan would require private business aircraft to pay higher user fees.

Lawmakers certainly can fine-tune the financing methods. But this Congress, which has accomplished remarkably little this year, has a pressing obligation to act now on the FAA's modernization plan - before the deterioration of the air traffic control system grows even worse.

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