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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-GAO-05-755T](#), a report to a report to Subcommittee on Aviation, Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

Why GAO Did This Study

Since the unprecedented flight delays in 2000, a year in which one in four flights were delayed, our aviation system has been adversely affected by many unanticipated events—such as the September 11th terrorist attacks, and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS)—that significantly reduced the demand for air travel. However, demand for air travel is rebounding. For example, the number of passengers traveling by air increased from 642 million in 2003 to 688 million in 2004.

Flight delays have been among the most vexing problems in the national transportation system and are defined by the Department of Transportation as instances when aircraft arrive at the gate 15 minutes or more after scheduled arrival time. In 2004, one in five flights were delayed primarily at New York La Guardia and Chicago O'Hare. Delays at these airports have consequences for the rest of the system. GAO's testimony addresses the following questions that pertain to flight delays and enhancing capacity: (1) What initiatives are ongoing by the federal government, airlines, and airports to address flight delays and enhance capacity? (2) What are some of the challenges in reducing flight delays and enhancing capacity? (3) What other options are available for reducing flight delays and enhancing capacity?

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-GAO-05-755T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Gerald Dillingham (202) 512-2834 or dillinghamg@gao.gov.

NATIONAL AIRSPACE SYSTEM

Initiatives to Reduce Flight Delays and Enhance Capacity are Ongoing but Challenges Remain

What GAO Found

Several initiatives to address flight delays and enhance capacity are ongoing. Many of these initiatives are reflected in FAA's February 2005 Operation Evolution Plan, which is a 10-year plan to increase capacity and efficiency of the national airspace system at 35 of the busiest airports in the United States. New runways opened in the last 6 years at the Phoenix, Detroit, and 5 other airports. Seven more runways are scheduled to open by the end of 2008. Congress and FAA also streamlined the process for building runways. In addition to building runways, several other initiatives were implemented. For example, in January 2005, FAA implemented the Domestic Reduced Vertical Separation Minimum which is designed to increase high altitude routes in the contiguous United States and Alaska. To reduce flight delays at some of the delay-prone airports, FAA is limiting the number of takeoffs and landings during peak periods at New York La Guardia and Chicago O'Hare and is considering auctioning off landing and take off rights at New York La Guardia.

A number of challenges in reducing flight delays and enhancing capacity remain. Chief among them is obtaining funding for the initiatives mentioned above; their successful implementation is predicated on the availability of funding from several sources, including FAA, airlines, and airports. Another challenge is reducing flight delays and enhancing capacity at delay-prone airports, such as New York La Guardia, which have little capacity to expand and would find it difficult to build even one more runway.

Other options to address delay problems include adding new capacity by building new airports. According to FAA, airport authorities in Chicago, Las Vegas, and San Diego are evaluating the need for new airports. Another option is to develop other modes of intercity travel, such as high-speed rail, where metropolitan areas are relatively close together. These options may conflict with the interests of one or more key stakeholder groups; and, in many cases, would be costly.

Flight delays totaled over one million in 2004



Source: FAA.