

**STATEMENT FOR COMMERCE COMMITTEE
HEARING ON AVIATION DELAY PREVENTION**
Senator Olympia J. Snowe
March 2001

Thank you, Madame Chair. I appreciate the opportunity to focus on this issue, because I am deeply concerned about the future of the U.S. aviation and air traffic system.

Flight delays are literally out of control and consumer confidence is at an all time low. This is our wake-up call, and modernization is critical. After all, by some estimates, air traffic congestion is expected to grow by upwards of 50 percent through 2008, and over 100 percent by 2015. I do not believe that we are currently prepared to handle growth of this magnitude.

I know that the Chair of the Aviation Subcommittee is developing legislation to address delay-related issues, and I commend her for tackling this. I know the option of peak hour pricing had been considered, but I understand that the Chair has removed the reference to peak hour pricing from her legislation. Nonetheless, I am concerned about the issue because peak hour pricing has been in the past and is now being considered as a possible solution to the congestion problems at Logan International Airport in Boston. We must ensure that rural small and medium size communities are not jeopardized. A recent FAA/ Massachusetts Port Authority runway expansion environmental impact report included a possible proposal to charge airlines higher prices for flights departing or landing at Logan during peak traffic hours in order to ease delays.

I am very concerned that this would force airlines to reduce flights or shift flights to off-peak times in order to avoid the peak scheduling fees. If this happens, the first casualty will be small communities, and this is unacceptable. Small and medium size communities in Maine rely heavily on service to Boston as a gateway to other destinations. In addition, many travelers destined for Portland, Bangor, or Presque Isle, Maine must connect through Boston to reach those communities. Reduced Maine-to-Boston service would not only make travel more inconvenient and expensive, it could also undermine the economy and economic development efforts throughout the state, which rely heavily on dependable, convenient, affordable air service.

I believe that we need to carefully evaluate the impact of such proposals on small community air service, as well as the impact on feeder traffic into large city airports like Logan, which the airlines need in order to make a hub city successful. In Maine, thousands of passengers rely on the Boston gateway. At the Bangor International Airport in Bangor, Maine, for example, 97 percent of Bangor passengers connect through Boston. In Presque Isle, Augusta, Rockland, and Bar Harbor, Maine, 100 percent connect through Boston.

The Boston Logan gateway is absolutely critical to Maine. A 1994 report issued by the Maine Department of Transportation on the importance of commercial air service to the state concluded that restricting access to Boston could cost Maine tens of thousands jobs, millions in payroll, and billions in sales.

I believe that we need to look at the big picture, and cutting off small communities is not the answer. Some of the problems in the air traffic system are

caused by factors beyond our control, such as weather. Other factors, including antiquated technology, capacity and how we manage capacity, and bureaucratic management -- or mismanagement -- can and must be addressed.

To this end, the FAA has in recent decades developed modernization initiatives to improve its programs and upgrade its systems. However, these efforts have been plagued by chronic cost and schedule overruns, due at least in part to what many believe was an overly ambitious strategy.

The FAA and industry certainly face enormous challenges as they attempt to keep pace with the rapid changes taking place in civil aviation, but we must do better than we have done. Between 1995 and 1999, delays were up from 11 to 58 percent of flights, and in 1999 alone, the length of the delays rose 18 percent. From 1995 to 1999, ground holds of one hour were up 130 percent, and delays of 2,3, or 4 hours were up even more. Cancellations were up 68 percent. And yet, the FAA and the airlines can't even agree on what is causing the delays, often pointing the finger at each other.

We need to move beyond the finger-pointing, and beyond the simple "band aid" approaches. We need to get together and get to the bottom of this. If these problems are not addressed soon, the air traffic system will not be able to keep pace with consumer demand, leading I believe to higher prices and greater consumer dissatisfaction -- not to mention increased pressures on safety. We simply cannot afford to allow this to happen. Once again, I would like to express my appreciation to the Chair and my thanks to the witnesses for sharing their insights.