

STATEMENT OF SENATOR CLELAND--HEARING ON FLIGHT DELAYS

September 14, 2000

Mr. Chairman, strong storms in the Midwest this week grounded almost 500 flights at Chicago O'Hare and stranded thousands of passengers. This is just the latest incident in a very long, hot summer which the FAA has called the worst travel season in U.S. airline history.

In a sense, the problems we will discuss today are an offshoot of our aviation success. Deregulation in 1978 transformed air travel into mass transportation. Pure and simple, Americans today can afford an airline ticket. As a result, since deregulation, we've seen the number of Americans choosing to fly increase by 300 percent, while the real cost of fares has plummeted 40 percent. 650 million people boarded planes last year. By 2009, that number is expected to skyrocket to an incredible one billion passengers. The lion's share of that increase--70 percent-- is expected to occur at the country's 28 largest airports.

Unfortunately, our capacity has simply not kept up with this surge in air travel. The alarm was sounded 3 years ago by the National Civil Aviation Review Commission's landmark report: "Given the delay and congestion problems that already exist," the report warned, "anticipated growth, without needed expansion of capacity in the air and on the ground, will simply reach a point at which it cannot be accommodated."

Some may attest that chokepoint is already here. Air space may be approaching gridlock, as the Mineta report warned. On the ground we have built only one major airport in the last 25 years. And from 1995 to 1999, only 3 new runways have been put into service at the 28 biggest airports in the nation.

We have the world's busiest airport in my home state. With 78 million passengers, Hartsfield Atlanta International Airport is also the country's most delay-impacted airport. The bottom line is that Hartsfield desperately needs a fifth runway. In 2005, with 100 million passengers projected, and with just the current four runways, it's estimated that each flight at Hartsfield will average 14 minutes of delay--double the average delay of seven minutes today. With construction of the fifth runway, it's estimated that Hartsfield will be down to five minutes of delay per flight-- a dramatic savings of nine minutes per flight. This savings--worth hundreds of billions of dollars--will benefit passengers not just in Georgia and the southeast, but passengers across the nation.

The causes of this past June's 50,000 delayed flights are many, and the solutions are not easy. But this should not be a blame game, and I applaud Secretary Slater's initiative to bring all parties to the table in a cooperative effort to find some answers. Today we will hear some of those suggestions from our witnesses. And let me say that I am extremely pleased that my friend Leo Mullin is numbered in this group. Leo is both an extremely perceptive policy person and a consummate businessman. Under his

leadership, Delta is now the world's most flown airline, and last year it flew a record 106 million passengers safely and with its customers' needs in mind. I have been a Delta passenger for more than 30 years, and this is one habit I intend to keep. Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this important hearing, and I look forward to hearing from today's witnesses.