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Federal Managers Association

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Airline Delays

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Mr. Chairman, Mr. Lipinski, and Members of the Subcommittee:

On behalf of the Federal Managers Association (FMA), I greatly appreciate the opportunity to offer insight into the growing problem of flight delays and cancellations, and their role in decreased customer satisfaction. I have extensive experience spanning more than twenty-four years as an air traffic controller, Training Manager, Staff Specialist, Air Traffic Manager, Operational Supervisor, and I am currently a Quality Assurance and Training Specialist at the Kansas City International Airport.

FMA is deeply concerned about the negative effects of delays and cancellations as they relate to safety and economic impact. It is imperative that we address and cure all problems that undermine the safety of the flying public and serve to compromise the economic feasibility of air transportation. To this end, FMA would like to take a moment to thank you and your colleagues in both the House and Senate for your support of AIR21 as well as the fiscal 2000 supplemental funding for the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) operations budget. These funds are critical to the FAA's continuing efforts to improve the efficiency of our aviation system.

Notwithstanding your commitment to provide the necessary funding, resources for the FAA will remain constrained, and as we move into the 21st century enlightened and challenged with leaps in technology only dreamed of

yesterday, we must ensure the proper oversight of this progression and transition. There are many elements to this intricate dilemma of delays: aircraft scheduling, weather, airspace, systems and equipment, and the human factor are all pieces of this puzzle. They must all fit and work together or the industry, the taxpayers, and the flying public will suffer. Ensuring the safety of the flying public must be our highest priority.

Since 1995, aircraft delays have increased more than 50 percent. We are faced with complex problems in the areas of scheduling, equipment, data acquisition, airspace design, and technologies both old and leading edge. Yet, with all the studies and evaluations that have been conducted, clear solutions to the problems seem to elude the FAA. FMA believes that, through an examination of past and present experiences, a vital component has not been sufficiently scrutinized.

The piece of the puzzle that we at FMA know to be underestimated and under-addressed is management oversight and support. The first-level supervisor in the Air Traffic Control operational environment is the liaison between safety and efficiency. Second-level supervision in the larger Air Traffic facilities is an integral part of this safety/efficiency formula, as are the support specialists who provide training, procedural development, and quality assurance. Since 1995, the FAA has embarked on an initiative to improve the agency's efficiency, following the recommendations of Vice President Gore's *National Performance Review* (now known as *the National Partnership for Reinventing Government*, or *NPR*) to move to a 15-to-1 employee-to-supervisor ratio throughout the federal government. The FAA, in an attempt to comply with guidelines set forth in this initiative, began reducing management oversight

and staff support in its Air Traffic facilities. The rapid increase in aircraft delays and negative safety indicators can be at least partly attributed to the FAA's goal of meeting a set employee-to-supervisor ratio, which has been arbitrarily determined by the agency to be 10-1.

This continuing decrease in operational oversight and staff support specialists has a comprehensive and detrimental effect on operations, including increases in delays, as well as safety factors such as runway incursions[1], surface incidents[2], operational deviations[3], and worst of all, operational errors[4]. For brief periods of time and during low-traffic shifts, there is no doubt that controllers can function without this oversight and support. However, eventually, conditions begin to deteriorate. Morale suffers due to personnel issues that go unaddressed. Training initiatives on changes to existing procedures/practices, safety trends, and recurrent training suffer without proper oversight and staff support. The tendency to "take the easy way," due to limitations exacerbated by a lack of adequate management oversight, has the unfortunate result of slowing down the flow. For instance, miles-in-trail restrictions[5] are not closely monitored, compromising the efficiency of the system. Also, the eagerness to act aggressively and accordingly to determine a new plan to accommodate changing weather conditions, or the willingness to

[1] A Runway Incursion is defined as any occurrence at an airport that involves an aircraft, vehicle, person, or object on the ground that creates a collision hazard or results in a loss of separation with an aircraft taking off, intending to take off, landing, or intending to land.

[2] A Surface Incident is defined as any event unauthorized, or an unapproved movement occurring within the movement area, or an occurrence in the movement area associated with one operation of an aircraft that affects or could affect the safety of flight. Surface incidents result from pilot deviations, vehicle or pedestrian deviations, or operational errors/deviations.

[3] An Operational Deviation is defined as: 1) Less than applicable separation between an aircraft and protected airspace or airspace delegated to another facility or position without approval; 2) An aircraft, vehicle, equipment, or personnel encroached upon a landing area that is delegated to another position of operation without prior coordination and approval.

[4] An Operational Error is defined as an occurrence attributable to an element of the air traffic control system: 1) Results in less than the applicable separation minima between two or more aircraft, or between an aircraft and terrain or obstacles and obstructions; 2) An aircraft lands or departs on a runway closed to aircraft operations after receiving air traffic authorization.

[5] Miles-in-trail restrictions are aircraft spacing requirements made by air traffic management in order to minimize delays and optimize system efficiency.

take the time necessary to correct controller deficiencies – however minor – are lost due to higher priorities as well as stretched resources in personnel and facility capability.

For example, at Kansas City International Tower, an ATCS Level 10 facility[6], it is becoming common practice for its Tower Cab operation to be overseen by a controller-in-charge rather than a supervisor because of the FAA's supervisory cutbacks. With only one supervisor on duty, this facility opts to have that one supervisor in the TRACON function. This is reflective all over the country in joint TRACON/Tower facilities. To meet the 10-1 employee-to-supervisor ratio, only one supervisor is authorized to oversee, for instance, seven controllers working in the TRACON function and four working in the tower function. This then leaves either the tower function or the TRACON function without a supervisor.

Recently, on a particularly bad weather day, both St. Louis and Chicago were under ground delay programs[7]. The supervisor placed a controller-in-charge in the TRACON (due to the lack of a supervisor in the TRACON) and went to the Tower Cab in order to assess firsthand the traffic delay situation. During this period, the controllers had decided as a group to combine the Tower Cab controller-in-charge function with another operating position to allow two people to go on break instead of just one. The supervisor, meanwhile, contacted the Kansas City Center Traffic Management Unit (ZKC TMU) in an effort to see what could be done to get some of the aircraft off the ground. By working with the ZKC TMU and the affected airlines directly, all aircraft

[6] ATC Facilities are rated by traffic volume and complexity into ATC Levels 5 through 12. ATCS Level 12 being the most voluminous and complex.
[7] A ground delay program is administered by the FAA, whereby aircraft are held on the ground and not authorized to take off.

subsequently received release times. However, the controller-in-charge duties were now being rotated to allow more frequent breaks. Specific direction was then given by the supervisor to decombine the "In Charge" position in order to initiate assistance in coordinating the avoidance of further delays.

This incident clearly shows that had another supervisor been staffed in the Tower Cab, these delays could have – and would have – been minimized, or even possibly prevented. When you multiply this situation by the more than 245 facilities in the Air Traffic system, you can see the potential negative impact to the flying public. The frequency and magnitude of such predicaments will only continue to increase because of the ongoing reduction of supervisors and support staff personnel in Air Traffic.

The Federal Managers Association has encouraged the FAA for the last 18 months to conduct a "needs-based assessment" of each air traffic control facility to determine appropriate supervisory and support staffing levels. The current staffing plan calls for a 10-to-1 employee-to-supervisor level ratio. While that may be an appropriate ratio for the Monday through Friday, 8 A.M. to 5 P.M. non-safety related workforce, we believe it is not what the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) and the NPR originally had in mind. The studies OPM and NPR conducted in trying to reach the proper ratio were based on workforce samples of Johnson Sausage and Ford Motor Company – not on highly stressed and emotionally charged organizations that are, at any given moment, responsible for the safe and expeditious movement of travelers. The FAA's most recent study (Air Traffic Evaluations Study 1993) indicated a need for a 7-to-1 ratio in Air Traffic Control towers, yet the agency continues to push ahead toward their goal of a 10-to-1 ratio.

As we examine the number of aircraft in the system since 1995 using the FAA's figures, we find there has been an average increase of 1.6 percent in air operations from 1995 to 1999. While the passenger enplanements have risen to over 680 million passengers per year, the actual number of airplanes in the air has increased at a seemingly manageable rate. Passenger enplanements do not cause delays. From an air traffic standpoint, we do not notice if the plane is empty or full; it takes up the same place in our system. In 1995, there were the same factors: thunderstorms, older equipment, reduced Traffic Management Initiatives, yet the number of delays was far lower at that time than it is today. Why is there still such a high number of delays, and why does it continue to rise?

What has changed is the structure of personnel management within the FAA. Management oversight and staff support have been reduced. We are now seeing the results of a growth in air traffic combined with a reduction in oversight and staff support at the very point in time we are attempting to bring on new hardware, software, and traffic management initiatives. The FAA was not prepared to deal with the flexibility it received once it was removed from Title 5 of the United States Code. The intent of removing the FAA from Title 5 was to gain expediency in equipment procurement. While this area has slowly improved, we have squandered time and resources exploring the "freedoms" that new personnel management afforded. Today, we are saddled with the results of this sidetracking.

All of these factors are now working against one another to create an atmosphere ripe for mistakes. This is apparent in the FAA's abysmal record of

delays, operational errors, operational deviations, and runway incursions. An overall 8% increase in operations from 1995 to 1999 should in no way increase the number of operational errors by 53 percent, operational deviations by 47 percent, runway incursions by 73 percent, or delays by 58 percent during the same period[8]. The relationship is quite obviously far from linear. These increases in the safety measures by which the FAA gauges its performance are tied directly to the decrease in management oversight and staff reductions, coupled with low morale due to inequitable pay reform.

An alternative discussion that has been raised in the light of the problems facing the agency is the issue of privatizing the federal aviation system. FMA agrees with the National Air Traffic Controllers Association (NATCA) that the answer to today's problems will in no way be solved by a move to privatization of this agency. Turning the control of the world's air traffic over to a private corporation driven by the "bottom line" dangerously goes against the most basic mission of air traffic control: ensuring the safety of the flying public. The flying public deserves tight controls and an efficient and effective system that guarantees their safety. We believe in making smart business decisions as well as protecting the taxpayer's hard-earned dollar, but we do NOT put the dollar first. Safety comes first, and that is absolute and unwavering. Private companies owe their existence – and therefore their allegiance – to the shareholders, and we cannot afford to have safety as a secondary priority.

Another area that will jeopardize the safety net that the FAA has successfully created is the argument involving increased leniency toward employees who make repeated mistakes, in particular, operational errors. The FAA standard

[8] Percentages compiled from the "Administrator's Fact Book" (web site: http:/www.ama500.jccbi.gov/factbook).

is – and has been for many years – possible dismissal, but generally, reassignment, if a person commits three operational errors within a 2-½ year period. Typically, that person is transferred to a less complex or less busy facility. Frankly, it is not in the FAA's best interest to put people out of work when so much time and resources have been invested in training, etc. The agency and NATCA have coined the term "decriminalization". This is meant to invoke passion. The bottom line is, day after day, year after year, we have used this rule (three operational errors in a 2 ½ year time frame) in order to ensure the safest system in the world. Remove it and focus in this area will naturally and unquestionably diminish. FAA controllers are highly skilled and more than capable of performing at a level that adheres to this standard. Remove it, and we will diminish the skills of this profession. Remove it, and lives could unnecessarily be placed in harm's way.

RECOMMENDATIONS

FMA believes that there are some "next steps" that can be taken in order to minimize delays as well as operational errors/deviations and runway incursions:

1. Reinstate management and support staff in the air traffic facilities to 1994 levels, just before the onset of a now-exponential growth in negative safety indicators. This will ensure proper management oversight and support for the technological advancements that are upon us now and for those in the future.
2. Hire 900 entry-level technicians in the Airway Facilities (AF) branch of the FAA. These are the people that maintain our radar, navigational,

and communication systems. Because management oversight has also been stripped from the AF branch, along with necessary dollars to fund training, both initial and recurring, critical radar systems cannot be immediately brought on line when something goes wrong. Our facilities are unable to keep qualified technicians in our facilities 24 hours a day. Many times when technicians are available, they have not had the necessary training and are not certified on critical systems. It takes approximately three years from the point of hiring to have a certified technician available. Taking into consideration the projected retirements in the next two to three years, we must have a trained workforce in place beginning now. We will be unable to keep up with fast-paced technological improvements if we are not prepared to maintain them.

3. Fully fund the FAA Operations budget as requested by the President. For years, the FAA did not manage its resources well. Congress wisely recognized this and began reducing funding. However, we are now at a breaking point. We have cut every corner imaginable. In fact, Mr. Chairman, at my facility, if you want to receive faxes you had better buy the paper yourself because there are no funds available. When we broaden the picture to include the systems we need to modernize, as well as the training needed to keep our agency a world leader in providing air traffic services, you can begin to realize the magnitude of this shortfall. The cost of partnership has also been greatly underestimated. To allow adequate time to work with controllers, technicians, and other specialists, there exists an associated cost. The lack of funding therefore further limits our ability to collaborate with our labor unions.

4. Develop strategies to overcome environmental issues, so that all proposed runway construction at pacer airports is completed in the next 4 years. Delays and congestion are occurring now. While we are not advocating a disregard for our environment, we do hope that some realistic guidelines can be established to streamline this process. Taking 10-20 years to build an airport is not efficient nor is it effective.

5. The Federal Managers Association requests a position on the FAA's Management Advisory Council so that we may represent the field management perspective as part of the decision making process. If we are not at the discussion table, we cannot use our knowledge and first hand experience to assist our agency in meeting its goals.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, it is with great concern that we approach the subject of delays because of the increased possibilities of a negative impact on the safety of the flying public. When planes begin to back up, the system becomes tense. Controllers, while experts in what they do, are nevertheless human. The potential for mistakes greatly increases as the system burgeons and planes are forced into areas that are out of standard procedure. On the ground, or in the air, delays increase the potential for a mistake – however accidental. That is why increased – not decreased – oversight, as well as ongoing awareness and education, are key elements in maintaining operational integrity and system efficiency.

Removing the FAA from the constraints of Title 5 was intended to help in efforts toward expeditious procurement. While this area has improved, the FAA's budget has since tightened, and enormous amounts of energy and focus

from the FAA are directed toward the human resource freedoms provided by removal from Title 5. Placing the human resource elements back under Title 5 while exempting procurement from the same would be a step towards refocusing the agency's efforts to ensure proper personnel management. The 1999 National Academy of Public Administration report[9] supports this belief.

We at the Federal Managers Association look forward to working with the FAA, Congress, and all interested parties to ensure the safety of the flying public, to optimize the efficiency of the FAA, and to maximize the return to the American taxpayer.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. Thank you again for allowing FMA to present our insight, and I will be glad to answer any questions the subcommittee may have.

[9] The FAA requested that the National Academy of Public Administration conduct a review of the agency's personnel reform system as required by Congress after three years of implementation of the reforms.