



REALITY CHECK

FEDERAL AVIATION ADMINISTRATION

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As the skies and airports become more crowded, the future of air travel will have to rely on innovative ways to relieve congestion. Fortunately, this year Congress has the opportunity to change an outdated and underfunded Air Traffic Control System (ATC) when it reauthorizes the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Currently, the debate includes restructuring funding and modernizing equipment and practices. Current infrastructure cannot support the expected rise in air traffic, and the Airport and Airway Trust Fund (AATF), the means for funding the ATC, will go bankrupt if the revenue system is not reformed. There are many myths about delays and the current state of air traffic.

Myth: *The status quo is fine—the airline industry has remained unchanged since 1970.*

Fact: Air travel today is very different from air travel 37 years ago when the ATC and the AATF were created. The government no longer sets ticket prices, and private air travel has increased substantially. The funding system is now outdated.

Myth: *The nation's air traffic control system is top of the line.*

Fact: Even though the current system is extremely safe, it is aging. The ATC is still based on an expensive and complicated ground radar network. By switching from radar positioning to satellite positioning, pilots will be able to take routes that are more direct, thus saving time and money.

Myth: *The current funding structure is sufficient to accommodate the increased corporate air travel.*

Fact: Private air travel uses the same ATC as passenger jets, but pays less. The primary revenue source for the AATF is a ticket tax created in 1970. Consequently, commercial airlines pay 94 percent of the Trust Fund's revenue, and utilize 68 percent of the services. Corporate and private jets contribute only 6 percent, yet use 26 percent of the services. A plane is a plane; there should be equal pay for equal services.

Myth: *The private jet use by corporate business people and Hollywood stars does not affect the average traveler.*

Fact: Private jets strain the system. After the 2007 Super Bowl, 175 private jets leaving from the three surrounding Florida airports caused delays and disrupted travel for thousands of commercial passengers.

Myth: *Airlines have always had delays. There is no need to reform the system.*

Fact: Flight delays are already up 16 percent in the first third of this year. With experts predicting an 85 percent increase in number of jets in the sky over the next 15 years, it is clear that the ATC is approaching its operational limits.

Myth: *Shifting the funding burden away from commercial airlines will help the airlines at the expense of recreational pilots.*

Fact: The reforms only affect planes that use turbine engines. Only half of private planes fall into this category. Small plane pilots operating in rural and noncongested areas will be able to continue to use the system as usual. At the same time, changes need to be made to make sure that all jets, including privately owned and corporate, pay their fair share when traveling in heavily congested areas where delays continue to increase.

Revenues should be linked to costs and greater investment must be made in proven, cost-saving technologies. Funding changes should be carefully considered; Congress should look for innovative solutions and not simply jack up fees paid by airlines and passengers through Passenger Facility Charges.

Hollywood stars and business tycoons should not be able to use the ATC at the expense of the ordinary airline passenger. The ATC must be upgraded to meet the rising demand.

If the Donald Trumps of the world want to use the heavier congested air routes they should pay their fair share so commercial airlines passengers won't have to subsidize their corporate air travel.