May 2010

NATIONAL AIRSPACE SYSTEM

Setting On-Time Performance Targets at Congested Airports Could Help Focus FAA's Actions

GAO Accountability • Integrity • Reliability

Highlights

Highlights of GAO-10-542, a report to the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Flight delays have beset the U.S. national airspace system. In 2007, more than one-quarter of all flights either arrived late or were canceled across the system, according to the Department of Transportation (DOT). DOT and its operating agency, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), are making substantial investments in transforming to a new air traffic control system—the Next Generation Air Transportation System (NextGen)—a system that is expected to reduce delays over the next decade. This requested report explains the extent to which (1) flight delays in the U.S. national airspace system have changed since 2007 and the contributing factors to these changes, and (2) actions by DOT and FAA are expected to reduce delays in the next 2 to 3 years. We analyzed DOT and FAA data for FAA's Operational Evolution Partnership (OEP) airports because they are in major metropolitan areas, serving over 70 percent of passengers in the system. We reviewed agency documents and interviewed DOT, FAA, airport, and airline officials and aviation industry experts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that FAA develop airport-specific on-time performance targets to better prioritize its actions and demonstrate their benefits. DOT and FAA provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate, and officials noted that airport-specific targets are one of the many tools that FAA can use to manage and measure delays.

View GAO-10-542 or key components.
For more information, contact Susan Fleming at (202) 512-2834 or flemings@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

Flight delays have declined since 2007, largely because fewer flights have been scheduled by airlines as a result of the economic downturn, but some airports still experience and contribute substantial delays to the system. The percentage of flights that were delayed—that is, arrived at least 15 minutes after their scheduled time or were canceled or diverted—decreased 6 percentage points from 2007 to 2009, according to DOT data. Even with this decrease in delays, during 2009, at least one in four U.S. passenger flights arrived late at 5 airports—Newark Liberty International (Newark), LaGuardia, John F. Kennedy (JFK), Atlanta Hartsfield International (Atlanta), and San Francisco International—and these late arrivals had an average delay time of almost an hour or more. In addition to these airports having the highest percentage of flights with delayed arrivals, these 5 airports, along with Chicago O'Hare International and Philadelphia International (Philadelphia), were also the source of most of the departure delays within FAA's air traffic control system. FAA measures delays within the air traffic control system to assess its performance because an inefficient air traffic control system contributes to higher levels of delayed flights. An FAA air traffic control tower or other facility may delay flights departing from or destined to an airport because of inclement weather or heavy traffic volume at that airport. In 2009, of the 34 OEP airports in GAO's analysis, about 80 percent of departure delays occurring at airports across the national airspace system were the result of conditions affecting air traffic at just these 7 airports.

DOT's and FAA's actions—including near-term elements of NextGen and other air traffic management improvements—could help reduce delays over the next 2 to 3 years and are generally being implemented at the airports that contribute to the most delays in the system. However, the extent to which these actions will reduce delays at individual airports or contribute to the agency's overall target is unclear. FAA has an 88 percent on-time arrival performance target for the national airspace system to measure how its actions help to improve systemwide on-time performance. This target, however, masks the wide variation in airport performance. For example, in fiscal year 2009, Newark had an on-time arrival rate of 72 percent, while St. Louis International exceeded the target with 95 percent. FAA has not established airport-specific performance targets, making it difficult to assess whether FAA's actions will lead to the desired on-time performance at these airports or whether further actions are required to improve performance, especially at airports affecting delays systemwide. Also, FAA's modeling indicates that even if all ongoing and planned NextGen and other improvements are implemented, a few airports, such as Atlanta, Washington Dulles International, and Philadelphia, may not be able to meet the projected increases in demand, and if market forces do not dampen that demand, additional actions may be required at these airports. However, without airport-specific targets, FAA cannot determine what additional actions might be required to achieve a targeted level of performance at these airports.