The DCA Act Would Bring Reagan National Airport to a Standstill

THE COALITION TO
Protect America's
Regional Airports

The Coalition to Protect America's Regional Airports (CPARA) analyzed the *Direct Capital Access (DCA) Act*'s potential impact on Reagan National Airport (DCA) using publicly available information and resources. Our findings demonstrate that the proposed legislation completely disregards DCA's limited size and physical constraints, smaller runways, impacts on existing service from DCA, and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) flight restrictions. Further, it appears no consideration was given to passenger safety and travelers' desire for safe, on-time, and convenient travel, nor the impact that additional delays and cancellations would have on connectivity at other airports around the country. CPARA's conclusion is directly supported by a new FAA memorandum finding that adding more slots at DCA would increase delays by 25.9% - 33.2% depending on the number of additional slots.[1]

BACKGROUND On May 10, 2023, the *Direct Capital Access (DCA) Act* was introduced, proposing 56 additional slots (or 28 round-trip flights) to and from DCA between the hours of 7:00am and 10:00pm each day. DCA is one of only three airports in the country operating directly under FAA slot rules to manage congestion due to the airport's limited size and geographic capacity constraints.[2]

FINDING #1: DCA is at capacity[3] – in the air, on the ground, in the terminal, and in its parking lots.[4]

- In 2022, DCA served a record 24 million passengers, or nearly 9 million more passengers annually than it was designed to handle.[5]

  – With as many as 900 flights a day,[6] aircraft land or depart DCA every minute.[7]

  – DCA's 58 gates each turn as many as 8 aircraft per day,[8] the maximum recommended level for the industry.[9]

  – Parking lots often reach 90% capacity or higher and have to turn away customers.[10]

- DCA is severely geographically constrained due to its location between the Potomac River and Arlington. There is no room to expand the airport or to accommodate additional vehicle traffic.

  – FAA slot and perimeter rules were designed in response to these limitations to promote safety, ease airport congestion, and reduce traffic around the airport.[11]

  – The FAA just released an analysis which found that a proposal such as the DCA Act would increase delays at the airport by more than 33%.[12]

  – Similarly, a 2020 GAO study found that the 2012 addition of a limited number of beyond perimeter flights may have attributed to increased delays and congestion.[13]

- Given these constraints, it is understandable that DCA has the 3rd highest percentage of cancelled flights out of all U.S. airports.[14]

FINDING #2: Recent trends in air traffic demonstrate that DCA and other airports are struggling to meet the traveler demand.

- DCA is facing a 27% shortage of certified controllers as compared to its FAA target number.[15] Any more flights at DCA will exacerbate the impact of this shortage, furthering delays and cancellations.

- The FAA is projecting a 45% increase in East Coast Airport delays for 2023 due to the controller shortage, and it has already asked carriers to reduce flying in NYC and at DCA to ease congestion.[16] Additional slot exemptions would directly contradict this FAA guidance.

- AAA forecasted about 3.4 million Americans flew for Memorial Day weekend, with air travel expected to only increase over the summer holidays.[17]

CONCLUSION: Given the data, the DCA Act as proposed would threaten Reagan National's ability to maintain already strained operations and increase delays, cancellations, congestion and traffic.

- At roughly ~166 passengers per flight, the proposed 56 slots would result in 9,296 additional passengers every day at DCA, or 3.6 million per year[18] – putting DCA at 12.6 million passengers over designed capacity. The bill provides no justification for the proposed number of slots or how more than 9,000 passengers would safely travel through DCA given the current constraints under which DCA operates.

  - The significant increase in passengers would strain limited parking, Metrorail, and taxi service to and from the airport, and increase congestion on local streets and highways in Washington, D.C., and Virginia.

  - Additional vehicle traffic would add to expected record-level congestion on the primary DCA access road, the George Washington Parkway, due to a multi-year rehabilitation project closing half available lanes.[19]

  - The proposed legislation provides no additional funding for Transportation Security Administration (TSA), or local Washington, D.C., or Arlington, Virginia police or emergency services to help move 3.6 million additional passengers per year.[20]

Even a cursory look at the current data would show that Reagan National Airport is at capacity. Proposing a bill that would bring more than 9,000 passengers per day through the heavily trafficked airport without the support of the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority (MWAA), the entity created by Congress to safely operate both DCA and Dulles International Airport (IAD), cannot be justified. It is legislation that does not contemplate the safety implications for passengers or flight crews, nor the impact on traffic, congestion, and excess emissions for local neighborhoods in Washington, DC, and Arlington, VA.

It is clear that The DCA Act would bring Washington National Airport to a standstill.

About the Coalition to Protect America's Regional Airports

The Coalition to Protect America's Regional Airports strongly believes that airport authorities – working with local communities and lawmakers – are best placed to make operational decisions at our airports, which will leader to safer, more convenient, and sustainable air travel. We oppose any changes to the High Density ("slot") and perimeter rules at Reagan National Airport (DCA). DCA is currently at capacity and at risk of being seriously overburdened should there be changes to the slot and perimeter rules. Adding more flights from DCA could create unnecessary gridlock, threaten jobs and local businesses, risk connectivity for countless communities, and increase congestion, delays, and noise. For more information, email info@protectregionalairports.com.

ENDNOTES

1 FAA memorandum, May 25, 2023

2 Slot Administration, Federal Aviation Administration, 2023

3 Airports Authority slams proposal to add more long-distance flights at DCA," *ABC 7 News*, May 17, 2023

4 This is referring to the time frame specified in the proposed legislation, and excludes overnight hours when passenger demand is low. DCA is at full capacity between the peak hours of 7:00 a.m. and 11:00 p.m., when passengers want to fly.

5 Hoyer Joins Congressional Colleagues in Opposing Increased DCA Traffic, Rep. Steny Hoyer, May 2023.

6 Reagan Air Traffic Statistics, Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority, August 2022-March 2023

7 This excludes overnight hours. DCA is at full capacity between the peak hours of 7:00 a.m. and 11:00 p.m., when passengers want to fly.

8 Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority

9 The Airport Cooperative Research Program has determined that maximum capacity for an airport is 6-8 gate turns per day.

10 Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority

11 Slot Administration, Federal Aviation Administration, 2023

12 FAA memorandum, May 25, 2023

13 "Information on Effects of Federal Statute Limiting Long-Distance Flights," p. 16, GAO, November 2020

14 Worst airports for delays and cancellations this summer, *CNN Travel*, September 8, 2022

15 The Air Traffic Controller Workforce Plan 2023-2032, p. 55, Federal Aviation Administration, 2023

16 The FAA is warning flyers of a 45% increase in flight delays this summer in NYC and DC as it deals with staff shortage, *Insider*, March 27, 2023

17 A record number of Americans may fly this summer. Here's everything you need to know, *NPR*, May 24, 2023

18 Flight size based off Being 737 capacity.

19 Why traffic could get a lot worse on GW parkway, *DC News Now*, April 24, 2023

20 Direct Capital Access Act of 2023

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