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U.S. Airline September Delays Fell on Better Weather

IdeaWorks contributed information to this article - - see italics.

Nov. 5 (Bloomberg) -- U.S. airlines' on-time performance improved in September for the first time this year as delays due to weather and traffic volume fell, the U.S. Transportation Department said today.

Nationwide, 82 percent of flights arrived on time, up from 76 percent a year earlier. New York's LaGuardia was the most-congested airport for the second straight month, and it again joined the region's other two major airports as the most congested in the U.S. so far this year.

“There are obviously too many flights that have been scheduled into these airports,” said Jay Sorensen, president of IdeaWorks consulting firm in Shorewood, Wisconsin. “Who wants to be the first one to bow out? New York is a hot market.”

Delays in 2007 remain at their worst level since the U.S. began keeping track in 1995, with 73 percent of flights arriving on time. Congestion is rising as more people fly and record-full planes gave airlines less flexibility to redirect passengers.

October may have given the industry a second straight monthly opportunity to improve. October on-time rates have fallen below 80 percent only three times since the government began keeping track in 1995.

Stormy Weather

September's drop in delays came after thunderstorms lashed the Northeast U.S. during the busy summer travel season.

“When you see that taper off, you start to see improvement,” said David Castelveter, a spokesman for the Air Transport Association trade group.

The Transportation Department said delays caused by weather and traffic volume fell to 6 percent of flights from 8 percent in September. The government defines on-time flights as those arriving within 15 minutes of schedule.

LaGuardia International Airport had 72 percent of flights arrive on time in September. It was followed by the San Francisco and Minneapolis airports, each with 74 percent.

For the first nine months of 2007, Newark Liberty International Airport had the worst on-time rate, at 59.6 percent, followed by LaGuardia at 59.9 percent and John F. Kennedy International at 60.9 percent.

Transportation Secretary Mary Peters is exploring solutions to cut Kennedy delays, such as charging airlines more to fly into the airport at busy times of the day. The Federal Aviation Administration is also seeking voluntary schedule cuts.

'Irrational'

“What the government is expecting the airlines to do is really quite irrational,” said Sorensen, a former marketing director at Midwest Air Group Inc.'s Midwest Airlines. “They’re asking them to control themselves.”

SkyWest Inc.'s Atlantic Southeast unit, which flies commuter planes for Delta Air Lines Inc., had the lowest on-time performance for the month, at 63 percent, followed by Alaska Air Group Inc.'s Alaska Airlines at 73 percent.

Aloha Airgroup Inc.'s Aloha Airlines, Hawaiian Holdings Inc.'s Hawaiian Airlines, Frontier Airlines Holdings Inc.'s Frontier Airlines and Continental Airlines Inc. led the industry with on-time rates at 88 percent or higher.

Mishandled bags, which typically rise when delays increase, declined in September as on-time arrivals improved.

There were 5.45 reports of mishandled luggage per 1,000 passengers in September, compared with 8.26 a year earlier, according to Transportation Department figures. Consumer complaints increased to 1.16 per 100,000 passengers from 0.82.