

O'Hare Limits Should Be Raised, Airport Group And City Argue

FAA should not extend its Chicago O'Hare flight caps rule through the summer unless the agency also raises the caps to allocate unused airport capacity, Airports Council International and the City of Chicago said last week.

Rolling over the current flight caps will lock in existing flight limits, even though the airport can now handle more flights, ACI and the city both argued in submissions to the U.S. Transportation Dept. The caps were imposed in 2004 after FAA reached a voluntary agreement with dominant carriers United and American. The agreement has already been extended at least once, and it is due to expire April 1. FAA is now proposing to extend the agreement through October.

ACI described the extension as a "flawed approach," noting there are other alternatives that would increase service to O'Hare. There is now a lot more capacity at O'Hare than when the caps were first introduced, partly because of the demise of Independence, ACI noted.

The city agreed there is "idle capacity" at O'Hare, because of FAA's delay reduction target has been exceeded. "The continued, unmodified renewal of the [caps agreement] are an unnecessary and harmful attempt to re-impose slot controls at O'Hare," the city said. Since the caps were introduced, they have caused the reduction or elimination of service to some communities, said the city.

Maximum Arrival Rate

If FAA does go ahead and extend the caps, it should lift the maximum arrival rate of 88 flights an hour to at least 92 an hour between 7 a.m. and 8 p.m., the city argues. A new scheduling conference should be held, where spare capacity could be allocated via a lottery.

In their submissions, United and American both supported the extension of the current caps, to give FAA and DOT enough time to develop a longer-term solution to congestion at O'Hare. United said there is a real risk that if the caps were taken off, O'Hare could quickly see the return of the delay problem that first prompted the flight caps.

When the caps were last extended, FAA also issued a proposed rule for a more permanent solution to O'Hare congestion. The agency accepted comments to this proposal and planned to issue a final rule before the flight caps extension expires April 1. The FAA and DOT have finished reviewing the comments and expect to issue the final rule shortly. However, FAA said it is proposing the new extension to the flight caps because the final rule won't be in place before the summer scheduling season begins. The agency also warned that congestion could return if the caps are allowed to expire before the final rule is in place. —AS