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O'Hare capacity takes hit in study

Updated analysis released as more flights are cut

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WASHINGTON -- As a third round of flight cuts to ease delays at O'Hare International Airport begins Monday, a new FAA study shows the airport is able to handle fewer flights without creating gridlock than previously thought.

O'Hare can accommodate between 190 and 200 arrivals and departures each hour under excellent and marginal weather conditions without tie-ups, according to the Federal Aviation Administration's updated analysis of a landmark capacity study. The airport can efficiently handle a maximum of 136 to 144 flights when visibility is poor, the study said.

The original study, released three years ago, said O'Hare could handle 200 to 202 flights hourly under good weather conditions. It also said the airport could handle more flights each hour in bad weather, 157 to 160 flights.

The new airport capacity study, to be released Monday, demonstrates the difficulty--despite reductions in airline schedules--of reducing congestion at O'Hare until new runways are built because the airport cannot efficiently handle as many planes as last year.

Congestion at O'Hare, the hub of the nation's commercial aviation system, has severely affected other airports and prompted the U.S. Department of Transportation to hold an emergency airline-scheduling conference in August that resulted in an agreement to cap flights during the busiest hours at O'Hare.

Flight reductions by American Airlines and United Airlines have totaled 7.5 percent since March. More cuts by the two big carriers take effect Monday and are projected to shave up to another 5 percent off peak-hour traffic.

The more conservative capacity figures in the revised FAA analysis reflect refinements in the measurements, including the use of three types of weather conditions instead of two used in the earlier study, said Jim McMahan, a top operations planning official at the FAA.

The study adds that changes in the way O'Hare handles air traffic since January 2003 have "reduced the frequency of occurrence of [the higher arrival and departure] rates."

"The average [flight] acceptance rate will be lower, since wind conditions frequently force the use of other configurations with lower [flight-acceptance] rates," the report said of the procedural changes.

Expansion not factor



Chicago's proposed \$15 billion expansion of O'Hare was not factored into the capacity study because the plan has not been approved, FAA officials said. An earlier FAA study released in June said O'Hare will probably face serious congestion until 2013, when the city expects the expansion project to be done.

Passengers have faced more delays this year, and for longer periods, because the airlines routinely schedule 200 to 220 flights per hour for up to 10 hours a day at O'Hare, regardless of the weather.

The increase in flights continued unabated until the federal government stepped in this year. Airline schedules for November 2003 at O'Hare showed a record 132 arrivals and an equivalent number of departures in the 6 p.m. hour before the FAA intervened.

A subsequent agreement reached between the airlines and the FAA that starts Monday and extends for six months limits airline flights to 88 arrivals per hour between 7 a.m. and 8 p.m. It also permits four unscheduled flights--such as general aviation or military--each hour during that peak period.

Extremely busy spells did occur before the Sept. 11 attacks, but not hour after hour like now. Ebbs in activity allowed air-traffic controllers to catch up on flight backlogs.

O'Hare rebounded more quickly than most other airports from the downswing in flights caused by Sept. 11. Airline overscheduling, especially since November, has made O'Hare's on-time performance the worst in the nation this year.

"From 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., we have constant busy traffic of 200 [flight] operations per hour. There are no slow periods when we can clean up the airport and start from scratch," said Craig Burzych, a veteran controller who is O'Hare tower president of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association.

Burzych said the FAA's revised capacity levels, an update of a landmark study released in 2001, are "more realistic. You have to make a more drastic cut [in airport capacity] if the airlines are going to continue over-scheduling," he said.

The FAA's capacity study, obtained by the Tribune in advance of its scheduled release on Monday, was ordered by Congress in the midst of record-breaking flight delays in the summer of 2000 to demonstrate the connection between airline scheduling and airport capacity at the nation's busiest airports.

The FAA expanded the number of airports covered in the latest study to 35 from 31 in 2001. Midway, the nation's fastest-growing airport, was added.

'Handling about all it can'

The study showed that Midway can handle 64 to 65 flights per hour in excellent or marginal weather and 61 to 64 flights in poor visibility and low clouds.

"Our numbers will bump up a little higher if there is a convention in town, but the airport is handling about all it can," said Ron Adamski, president of the controllers union at Midway.

The FAA report said procedural and technology improvements planned for Midway by 2013 are expected to improve capacity by about 9 percent in good and marginal weather only. But the capacity increase is seen as temporary. An earlier FAA study released in June said that despite the improvements, Midway will be constrained from adding flights after 2020.

Meanwhile, the new flight reductions at O'Hare that were brokered by the FAA in its talks with the airlines will last until April 30. United and American are moving a total of 37 flights out of peak afternoon and evening periods.

Although it's a smaller move than the 60 daily flight cuts the FAA sought, officials predict it will help. "I'm optimistic because in addition to the net reductions by American and United, the other airlines won't be able to grow their schedules without FAA approval," Chicago Aviation Commissioner John Roberson said.

The FAA said the November flight adjustments are expected to cut the amount of time lost due to delays by 20 percent at O'Hare and 5 percent nationally.

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