

**STATEMENT OF
THE HONORABLE JERRY F. COSTELLO
HEARING ON AVIATION CONSUMER ISSUES: EMERGENCY CONTINGENCY PLANNING
AND OUTLOOK FOR SUMMER TRAVEL
MAY 20, 2009**

I want to welcome everyone to our Subcommittee hearing on “Aviation Consumer Issues: Emergency Contingency Planning and Outlook for Summer Travel.”

This Subcommittee continues to examine consumer issues and airline delays to provide accountability and oversight of the Department of Transportation (DOT), the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), and the airline industry. In the 110th Congress, the Subcommittee held a series of four hearings and one roundtable meeting on flight delays and consumer issues.

Today, we will examine the progress and remaining challenges to reduce flight delays, and improve airline consumer protections.

Although delay and customer service statistics show improvement overall, we are interested in hearing from the witnesses to learn if these trends can be maintained when air travel rebounds.

The downturn of the economy had a significant impact on the airlines. Roughly 13 percent of domestic scheduled flights were cut, fares increased, and new fees for services, such as checked baggage, were initiated. This led to a 10 percent decline in passengers, compared to the same period in 2007. With fewer flights and less passengers, airline delays decreased. According to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, approximately 20 percent of flights were delayed or cancelled thus far through March 2009, the lowest level since 2003.

Despite this decline in delays nationwide, New York remains a critical chokepoint in the system. I have requested that the DOT Inspector General (IG) examine how the delays in the New York regional airspace affect the rest of the National Airspace System and I look forward to the IG’s preliminary assessments.

According to the FAA, 75 percent of delays nationwide in the summer of 2007 resulted from congestion surrounding New York. The DOT IG will report today on progress made by FAA to implement the 77 operational and infrastructure improvements that the New York Aviation Rulemaking Committee recommended.

Today’s hearing will also touch on how the aviation industry plans and reacts to health emergencies, and what precautionary steps are taken to protect passengers and those who work onboard the aircraft. This is especially important with the recent outbreak of the swine flu.

The airline industry plays an important role in assisting public health officials to control the spread of communicable diseases. The outbreaks of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and avian flu have shaped how government agencies and airlines prepare and plan for public health emergencies to protect public health and diminish major travel disruptions.

Air travel continues to be safe, despite the recent swine flu outbreak. Airports and airlines are voluntarily increasing their efforts to clean public spaces thoroughly and are informing the public on the latest travel and health advisory notices. Flight attendants also play a critical role in screening passengers for “flu-like” symptoms and taking precautions to ensure passengers are protected from exposure to the virus.

The hearings we held in the 110th Congress greatly shaped the consumer protection provisions incorporated into H.R. 915, the “FAA Reauthorization Act of 2009.”

Tomorrow the House of Representatives will consider this legislation and I look forward to working with the Senate to pass a final bill that includes strong consumer protection.

With that, I want to again welcome the witnesses today and I look forward to their testimony.