Senate Committee-Passed FAA Bill Revived Debate over Reagan National Airport Slot and Perimeter Rules

April 29, 2024

On February 29, 2024, seven months after the House of Representatives passed Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) reauthorization legislation H.R. 3935, the Senate version of the bill (S. 1939) was reported by the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation and placed on the Senate legislative calendar. S. 1939 included a provision that would add 10 daily slots for within- or beyond-perimeter flights at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (DCA), which revived the debate over the DCA flight limits known as the "slot and perimeter rules." The most recent multiyear FAA reauthorization (P.L. 115-254) expired at the end of FY2023, upon which three short-term extensions have been enacted, extending FAA authorities and aviation tax revenue collections through May 10, 2024.

Airlines flying to and from DCA are subject to slot and perimeter rules set by federal law and regulation (49 U.S.C. §41718; 14 C.F.R. §93.123). A *slot* is an instrument flight rules (IFR) reservation required for each takeoff or landing. By controlling the frequency of takeoffs and landings, a slot system is typically put in place at airports with capacity constraints to help ensure safety and optimize efficiency. Federal law and regulation set the total number of flights that can be handled in a given period of time at DCA. A round-trip flight serving DCA would require two slots, or a "slot pair."

Flights to and from DCA are also restricted by a statutory "perimeter rule" that limits nonstop flights to a 1,250-mile distance unless they are granted an exemption by law. Flights of 1,250 miles or less are referred to as "within-perimeter." Exempted flights are referred to as "beyond-perimeter." The perimeter rule, which dates to the opening of Washington Dulles International Airport (IAD) in the early 1960s, was originally designed to move most long-distance airline traffic serving the Washington, DC, area to the newer airport.

DCA is limited to a maximum of 67 hourly slots for flights both within- and beyond-perimeter. This maximum was established through a combination of federal regulations and statutes. Regulations at 14 C.F.R. §93.123 established 60 hourly slots at DCA, while statutes have granted an additional maximum of 7 slots and have permitted slots to be used in different hours. The DCA slot rule has existed for over two decades, although the statutory limitations on the number of slots available have been modified over that period.

Prior to congressional action in 2000, all slots for flights arriving or departing DCA were required to operate within-perimeter. As part of FAA reauthorization legislation in 2000, 2003, and 2012, Congress collectively granted 40 beyond-perimeter daily slots at DCA (20 round trips). According to a 2020 report by the Government Accountability Office (GAO-21-176), these 20 daily beyond-perimeter round trips are being operated between DCA and the following 10 cities:

- Austin, TX (1 round trip by Southwest Airlines)
- Denver, CO (4 round trips—3 by Frontier Airlines and 1 by United Airlines)
- Las Vegas, NV (1 round trip by American Airlines)
- Los Angeles, CA (4 round trips—1 by Alaska Airlines, 2 by American Airlines, and 1 by Delta Air Lines)
- Phoenix, AZ (3 round trips by American Airlines)
- Portland, OR (1 round trip by Alaska Airlines)
- Salt Lake City, UT (1 round trip by Delta Air Lines)
- San Francisco, CA (2 round trips—1 by Alaska Airlines and 1 by United Airlines)
- San Juan, PR (1 round trip by JetBlue Airways)
- Seattle, WA (2 round trips by Alaska Airlines)

During the FAA reauthorization debate in the 118th Congress, whether or not to allow additional DCA slots, including beyond-perimeter slots, has generated considerable interest from some Members of Congress and aviation stakeholders. In mid-2023, two bills, H.R. 3185 and S. 1933, were introduced that sought to add 56 new slots at DCA to allow 28 additional daily round-trip flights. Neither bill specified how many slots could be used for beyond-perimeter flights. This proposed increase of 56 new slots generated support as well as opposition from various stakeholders. The proposal was subsequently reduced to 14 new slots (7 new daily round-trip flights) as an amendment to the House FAA reauthorization bill, H.R. 3935. This amendment, however, was not agreed to in H.R. 3935, which passed the House on July 20, 2023, leaving intact the previously existing slot and perimeter system.

Washington, DC, metropolitan area local governments and residents living near DCA or under its flight paths have generally opposed an increase in slots as it would lead to an increase in flights. Although opposition focuses primarily on the flight delays and noise impacts of additional traffic and congestion, many also have expressed concerns over runway safety as well as the potential reduction of flights serving regional airports and smaller markets within-perimeter. This is because airlines would likely use new beyond-perimeter slot exemptions for nonstop flights to big cities outside the 1,250-mile radius.

Delta Air Lines and other members of the Capital Access Alliance group support the expansion, advocating that improving passenger access to the nation's capital will increase the affordability and efficiency of air travel and bring economic growth. United Airlines, which has a large operation at nearby IAD, opposes the changes as part of the Coalition to Protect America's Regional Airports.

The Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority (MWAA), which operates both DCA and IAD, advocates to preserve the DCA slot and perimeter rules. MWAA maintains that the DC region is well served by the bigger IAD, which is located about 30 miles west of the District of Columbia in Northern Virginia and has no flight restrictions. The MWAA 2023 Air Traffic Statistics shows that DCA had about 25.4 million passengers in 2023, approximately half a million more than the 24.9 million passengers going through IAD.

Author Information

Rachel Y. Tang
Analyst in Transportation and Industry

Disclaimer