

U.S. Department of Transportation

NEWS:



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STATEMENT BY U.S. SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION DREW LEWIS
AT A NEWS CONFERENCE ON THE
METROPOLITAN WASHINGTON AIRPORTS POLICY
WASHINGTON, D.C.
JULY 8, 1981

The new policy we are proposing today for National Airport is designed to assure the maximum safety of air operations in the Washington area, reduce noise and congestion at National Airport, and encourage the greater use of Dulles International Airport.

In developing this policy, safety, as always, was our paramount concern. We have an excellent safety record at National Airport and we intend to make sure that flight safety is not imperiled in any way.

Noise at National has been a community concern for years. In addressing that issue, we took the position that those disturbed by the noise at National should get as much consideration as those who benefit from its services.

While its "close-in" location makes Washington National popular with the airlines, over-use of the airport can result in congestion -- both on the air-side and the land-side, causing travelers delay and inconvenience, and resulting in operating inefficiencies. At the same time, Dulles is operating well below capacity.

Those are the concerns behind our policy proposal; now let me address the specific issues.

First, to prevent congestion, we are setting a ceiling of 16 million passengers a year. That is approximately the number of passengers that can be handled at National without a costly expansion of facilities.

From 11 million passengers in 1972, National grew to 15 million in 1979. There is, however, no legal limit on passenger growth at the present time. According to recent forecasts, the traffic flow at National would probably reach 16 million by 1984 and could reach 19 million passengers a year by 1990. If growth were permitted to continue at that rate, at some point we would be faced with a substantial public investment in additional parking, gate positions and other facilities at National, while the ample facilities already at Dulles remained underutilized.

Second, we propose to meet the noise objections in two ways: first, by reducing the total number of daily airline operations; and -- second -- by setting strict noise limits that will bring late evening and night operations down to significantly quieter levels.

The scheduled air carriers currently operate at National on a 16-hour day and as a practical matter flights regularly operate after 10 p.m. and may arrive or depart as late as midnight. We propose to set strict scheduling limits of 7 a.m. to 10 p.m.

We are, in effect, putting a "noise lid" on National at 9:59 p.m. After 10 p.m. and until 6:59 a.m., no flights will be permitted to depart unless they can stay within a noise level of 72 decibels. No jet airliner presently in use can meet that limit.

To further control noise and avoid congestion, we are proposing to reduce the number of landing and takeoff "slots" available to the airlines. Slots were established some years ago as a means for dealing with the high demand by the airlines for access to Washington National. Under present rules, 40 slots an hour are available to the airlines, for a 16-hour day. Under our policy the air carriers will be restricted to 37 slots an hour for a 15-hour day.

We also propose to maintain the current number of slots for general aviation, at 12 per hour.

Allocations for commuter airline flights will be increased from eight per hour to 11 per hour, reflecting the growth in the commuter airlines and the service they provide to small cities. The smaller, quiet commuter aircraft are ideally suited, we believe, to National Airport.

A full regulatory impact analysis under the President's directive on federal regulations will be conducted on the basis of actual experience. That analysis, to be completed within a year from the effective date of the regulations, will provide the groundwork for any changes to the policy that may prove advisable.

In addition to reducing noise and congestion at National Airport, our plan -- we feel -- promotes the greater use of Dulles International Airport in five ways:

First, the noise limits to go into effect with this policy will force airlines operating the noisier aircraft or with nighttime operations to use the larger airport.

Second, we believe that the reduction in landing and takeoff positions will cause more carriers to opt for Dulles where there are no slot limitations.

Third, one of the impediments to the greater use of Dulles has been the limited availability of ground transportation. We are proposing to accelerate -- by nine months -- construction of the connector highway between I-66 and the Dulles access road. We would hope to begin construction this fall, with completion of the project in 27 months. We also plan to explore the feasibility of linking downtown ticket counters with free or low-cost public bus transportation to Dulles. If the plan proves feasible, passengers could buy their tickets at convenient downtown locations and take special buses direct to the airport.

Fourth, our policy also sets more stringent noise levels to become effective in 1986. On that date National Airport will become off-limits to virtually all of the air carrier jetliners now serving that airport. Only the new generation of quieter, more fuel-efficient planes -- the DC-9-80, the 737-300 and the 757 and 767 aircraft now under development, plus other aircraft if re-engined -- will be able to meet the noise levels we are recommending for National Airport in five years.

It is not practical to set lower limits at an earlier date because the new aircraft must come on line and quieter engines for the existing aircraft must be programmed. We believe that with proper incentives the transition to quieter jet aircraft can be accelerated, but in the meantime the noise levels we have set will provide immediate relief and -- at the same time -- encourage a more equitable balance of traffic between National and Dulles.

Fifth, we propose to extend the nonstop limit for National departures to 1,000 statute miles. This is the range within the limits of "same-day" round trips, and passengers flying farther by and large should not object to the few additional minutes needed to travel to Dulles. In addition to the cities served directly from National under the "grandfather" agreement, a number of other cities become eligible under the 1,000-mile non-stop rule. Those most likely to get direct service are Kansas City, New Orleans, Birmingham and Fort Lauderdale.

Those, we believe, are the key points in our policy proposal. The thrust of our plan, as I have indicated, is to strengthen air safety, reduce the noise in areas impacted by National Airport, make more efficient use of the public's investment in Dulles, and to assure that air travelers to and from the nation's capital are served efficiently and with a minimum of congestion.

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A public hearing date has been set for July 28th, with the public comment period to close August 21st. If approved, the rule could go into effect October 25th.