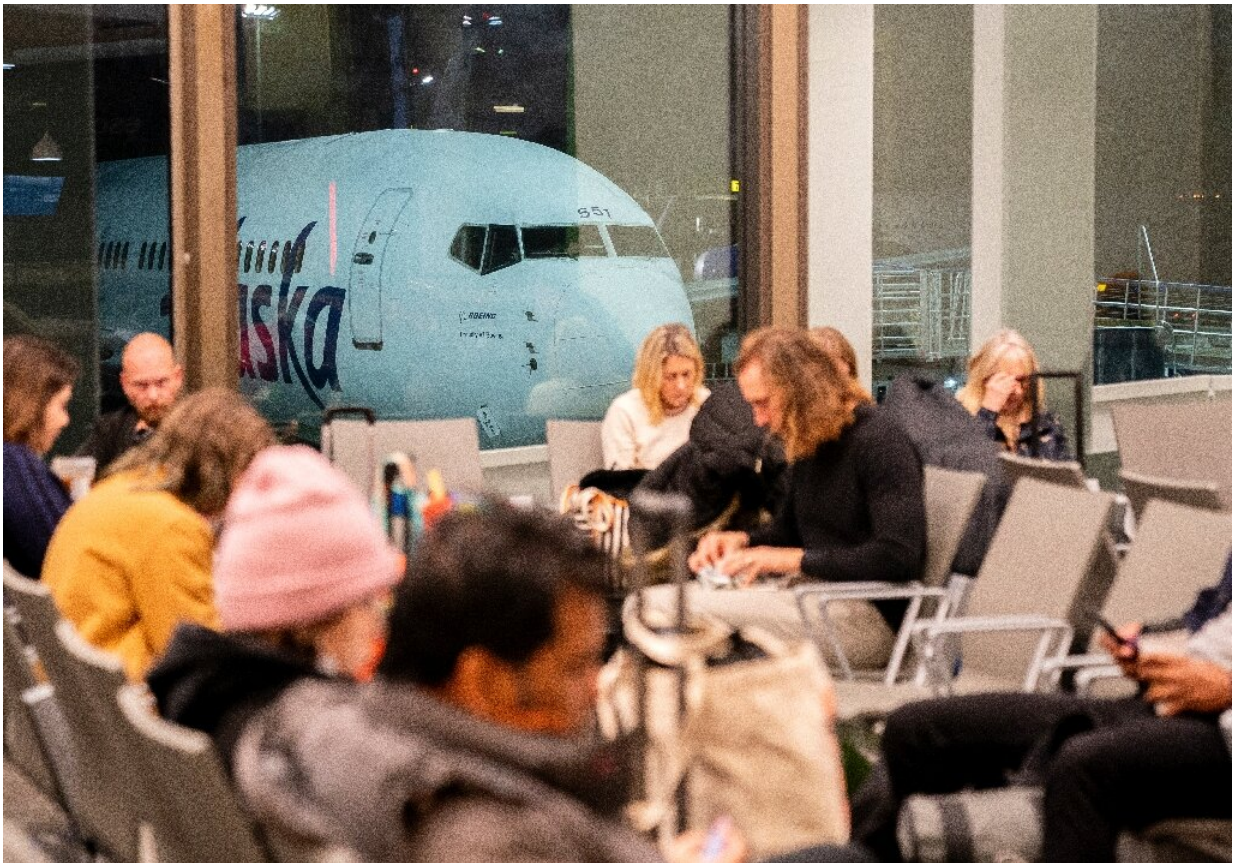


US aviation regulator probing system outage after huge disruption

January 12 2023, by John BIERSE, with Julie CHABANAS in Washington



Travelers wait as an Alaska Airlines plane sits at a gate at Los Angeles International Airport on January 11, 2023.

Aviation authorities were racing Wednesday to figure out what caused the outage of a crucial alert system that forced the temporary halt on all

US domestic takeoffs, triggering thousands of delays and cancellations.

The US Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) said normal operations were being restored but the early morning halt created knock-on effects that snarled travel throughout the day.

The grounding order was issued after the FAA identified an issue with the Notice to Air Missions system (NOTAM), which provides information to pilots about hazards, changes to airport facilities and information that can affect flights.

"Our preliminary work has traced the outage to a damaged database file," the FAA said in a tweet Wednesday evening, adding that "at this time, there is no evidence of a cyberattack."

The temporary outage spelled yet another hellish day for US travelers—less than a month after a bad winter storm roiled the system.

"I just learned that my flight was delayed again," said Vince Hamilton, who was at Reagan National Airport near Washington seeking to travel to Chicago, and then on to St. Louis—where, he said, "I have to catch a bus that I'm probably going to miss."

Wednesday's nationwide order was believed to be the first time since the attacks of 9/11 that such a broad command had been issued, according to aviation experts cited in US media. The FAA did not respond to queries seeking confirmation.

Near 8:00 pm eastern time (0100 GMT Thursday), more than 1,300 flights within, into or out of the United States had been canceled, with more than 9,800 suffering delays, according to flight tracking website Flight Aware.

The difficulties sparked fresh criticism on Capitol Hill and throughout Washington of the FAA, which has had no confirmed administrator since March.



A traveler looks at a display listing cancelled and delayed flights at Ronald Reagan National Airport in Virginia on January 11, 2023.

Cause unknown

The FAA reported the problem on Twitter at 6:29 am EST (1129 GMT), saying it was working to restore the NOTAM system, before announcing 50 minutes later that it ordered a pause on all domestic departures until 9:00 am.

Flying experts say the system in question contains a range of highly relevant details, such as a closed runway, to less significant matters, like the presence of a crane somewhere in or near the airport.

About 30 minutes after the FAA lifted the stop order, a screen at Reagan National Airport was overwhelmingly red with flight delays and just a handful of departures.

"Customers may continue to see some delays and cancellations as we work to restore our schedule," United Airlines said shortly after the stop order was lifted, adding it would refund customers who no longer wished to travel.

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg also said on MSNBC that there was no evidence of "nefarious" causes to the attack—but that it could not yet be ruled out.

Noting that the FAA systems have backups, Buttigieg said the inquiry would look at "why, with all that redundancy, it still rose to the level where... there had to be a ground stop lasting about an hour and a half, and all the delays we saw."

Senator Maria Cantwell, the Democratic Chair of the Senate Commerce Committee, also vowed to shed light on the incident.



A plane sits at Los Angeles International Airport on January 11, 2023 amid a departure halt.

"We will be looking into what caused this outage and how redundancy plays a role in preventing future outages," Cantwell said.

Republican Senator Ted Cruz of Texas said the "completely unacceptable" outage "highlights why the public needs a competent, proven leader with substantive aviation experience leading the FAA."

The White House last week renominated Phillip Washington to be the lead US aviation regulator, replacing former head Stephen Dickson, who left office on March 31.

Washington was originally nominated in July, but the Senate did not schedule a confirmation hearing, with some lawmakers questioning his lack of background in aviation.

Washington served as head of Denver International Airport in 2021 after a long US Army career followed by other non-aviation transportation posts.

Travel industry officials said Wednesday's crisis points to key vulnerabilities in US infrastructure.

"Today's FAA catastrophic system failure is a clear sign that America's transportation network desperately needs significant upgrades," said US Travel Association President Geoff Freeman.

The halt comes in the wake of a large-scale aviation meltdown in the United States over the Christmas holiday, as a storm brought unseasonably cold temperatures and travel chaos to the majority of the country.

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