

# After several turbulent days, flight disruptions ease despite worries about 5G signals

July 1 2023, by David Koenig

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People travel through Salt Lake City International Airport Friday, June 30, 2023, in Salt Lake City. Credit: AP Photo/Rick Bowmer

Airline passengers who have endured tens of thousands of weather-related flight delays this week got a welcome respite from the headaches Saturday, despite concerns about possible disruptions caused by new

wireless 5G systems rolling out near major airports.

The number of flight delays and cancellations declined from the spikes recorded earlier in the week, according to data compiled by tracking service FlightAware. As of 10 p.m. EST, there had been at least 850 flight cancellations and more than 28,000 delayed flights Saturday. During the June 28-30 period, an average of 1,751 flights were canceled and more than 32,600 flights delayed, according to the FlightAware data.

The cancellation rate worked out to about 1% in the U.S. as of Saturday afternoon, according to Flightradar24, another tracking service. Flightradar24 spokesperson Ian Petchenik described Saturday's conditions as "smooth sailing" in an email to The Associated Press, while adding inclement weather could cause problems at East Coast airports later in the day.

The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration also advised travelers that bad weather conditions on the East Coast could affect flights later Saturday.

Heading into Saturday, one of the biggest concerns had been whether 5G signals would interfere with aircraft equipment, especially devices using radio waves to measure distance above the ground that are critical when planes land in low visibility.



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Predictions that interference would cause massive flight groundings failed to come true last year, when telecom companies began rolling out the new service. They then agreed to limit the power of the signals around busy airports, giving airlines an extra year to upgrade their planes.

The leader of the nation's largest pilots' union said crews will be able to handle the impact of 5G, but he criticized the way the wireless licenses were granted, saying it had added unnecessary risk to aviation.

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg recently told airlines that [flights could be disrupted](#) because a small portion of the nation's fleet has not been upgraded to protect against radio interference.

But the worst fears about 5G hadn't cropped up by mid-afternoon Saturday, prompting Transportation Department spokesperson Kerry Arndt to describe flight travel as being at "near-normal" levels. But Arndt also stressed that the Federal Aviation Administration is "working very closely with airlines to monitor summer pop-up storms, wildfire smoke, and any 5G issues."



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Most of the major U.S. airlines had made the changes needed to adapt to 5G. American, Southwest, Alaska, Frontier and United say all of their planes have height-measuring devices, called radio altimeters, that are protected against 5G interference.

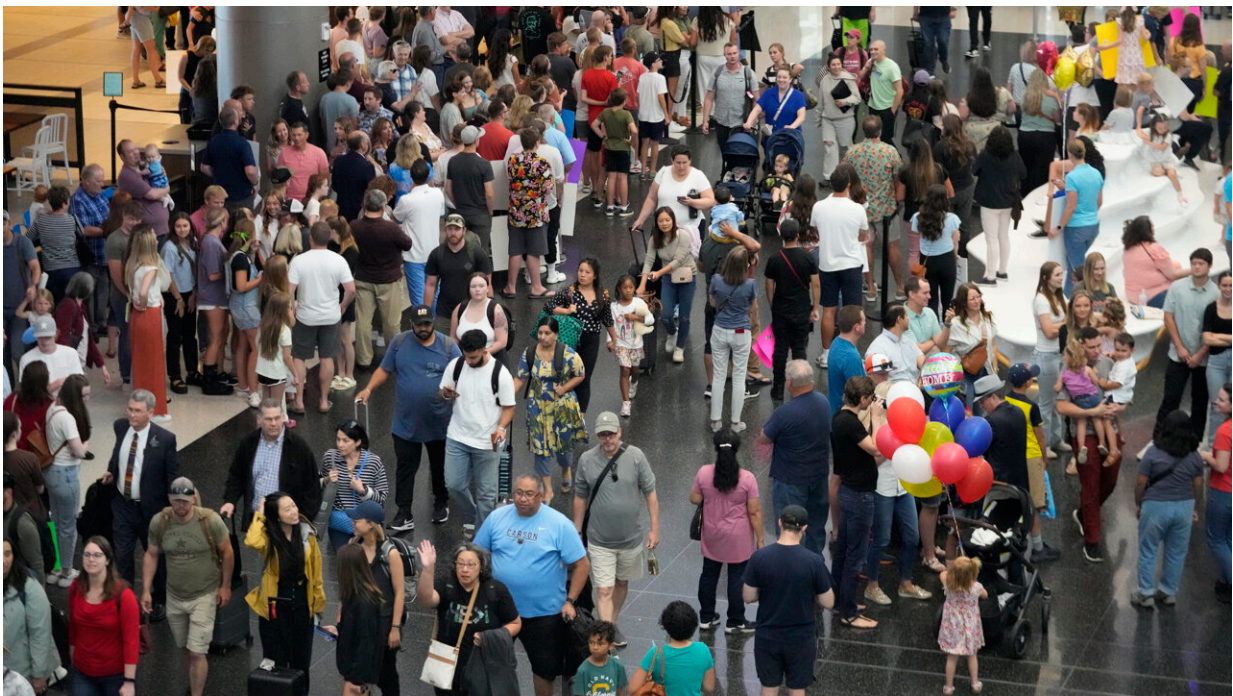


The big exception is Delta Air Lines. Delta says it has 190 planes, including most of its smaller ones, that still lack upgraded altimeters because its supplier has been unable to provide them fast enough.

The airline does not expect to cancel any flights because of the issue, Delta said Friday. The airline plans to route the 190 planes carefully to limit the risk of canceling flights or forcing planes to divert away from airports where visibility is low because of fog or low clouds.

FlightAware listed nine Delta flight cancellations Saturday. None of them were tied to 5G issues, according to the airline.

The Delta planes that have not been retrofitted include several models of Airbus jets: all of its A220s, most of its A319s and A320s and some of its A321s. The airline's Boeing jets have upgraded altimeters, as do all Delta Connection planes, which are operated by Endeavor Air, Republic Airways and SkyWest Airlines, according to the airline.



Travelers walk through crowds after arriving at the Salt Lake City International Airport Friday, June 30, 2023, in Salt Lake City. Credit: AP Photo/Rick Bowmer

JetBlue did not respond to requests for comment but told The Wall Street Journal it expected to retrofit 17 smaller Airbus jets by October, with possible "limited impact" some days in Boston.

Wireless carriers including Verizon and AT&T use a part of the radio spectrum called C-Band, which is close to frequencies used by radio altimeters, for their new 5G service. The Federal Communications Commission granted them licenses for the C-Band spectrum and dismissed any risk of interference, saying there was ample buffer between C-Band and altimeter frequencies.

When the Federal Aviation Administration sided with airlines and objected, the wireless companies pushed back the rollout of their new service. In a compromise brokered by the Biden administration, the wireless carriers then agreed not to power up 5G signals near about 50 busy airports. That postponement ends Saturday.

AT&T declined to comment. Verizon did not immediately respond to a question about its plans.



Travelers walk through crowds after arriving at the Salt Lake City International Airport Friday, June 30, 2023, in Salt Lake City. Credit: AP Photo/Rick Bowmer





A Delta Air Lines jet prepares to land at Los Angeles International Airport, in Los Angeles, Tuesday, March 15, 2022. Airline passengers dealing with weather delays could be facing a new source of disruptions this weekend. Wireless providers plan to power up new 5G systems near major airports on Saturday, July 1, 2023. Credit: AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes

Buttigieg reminded the head of trade group Airlines for America about the deadline in a letter last week, warning that only planes with retrofitted altimeters would be allowed to land under low-visibility conditions. He said more than 80% of the U.S. fleet had been retrofitted, but a significant number of planes, including many operated by foreign airlines, have not been upgraded.

"This means on bad-weather, low-visibility days in particular, there



could be increased delays and cancellations," Buttigieg wrote. He said airlines with planes awaiting retrofitting should adjust their schedules to avoid stranding passengers.

Airlines say the FAA was slow to approve standards for upgrading the radio altimeters and supply-chain problems have made it difficult for manufacturers to produce enough of the devices. Nicholas Calio, head of the Airlines for America, complained about a rush to modify planes "amid pressure from the telecommunications companies."

Jason Ambrosi, a Delta pilot and president of the Air Line Pilots Association, accused the FCC of granting 5G licenses without consulting aviation interests, which he said "has left the safest aviation system in the world at increased risk." But, he said, "Ultimately, we will be able to address the impacts of 5G."

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