

American Airlines resumes trying to pack planes as virus cases surge

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American Airlines resumed trying to fill its planes to full capacity Wednesday, abandoning some coronavirus precautions and drawing criticism from public health officials as the pandemic runs wild in parts of America.

While other carriers such as Delta Air Lines decided in May to keep some seats empty so travelers could practice social distancing, others like United Airlines had not taken such measures because at that point no one was flying anyway.

The decision by American Airlines comes as steps to reopen the US economy coincide with a major surge in COVID-19 cases.

Robert Redfield, the director of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, told lawmakers this week the American Airlines decision had caused "substantial disappointment."

"We don't think it's the right message," he told a Senate hearing Tuesday.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government's top expert on infectious diseases, also criticized the decision as he warned that the country could reach 100,000 [new virus](#) cases a day if more is not done to suppress the pandemic.

"Obviously, that is something that is of concern. I'm not sure what went into that decision making," he said at the same Senate hearing. "I think in the confines of an airplane that becomes even more problematic."—Air as clean in hospitals-

The virus has claimed more than 127,000 lives in the US and as of Tuesday night it had recorded more than 42,000 new cases in the previous 24 hours, according to the Johns Hopkins University tracker.

Because of the sharp rise in deaths and cases of infection, particularly in the south and west, some

states have put the reopening of their economies on pause.

American Airlines appears to be moving in the opposite direction when it comes to coronavirus precautions.

"We are unwavering in our commitment to the safety and well-being of our customers and team members," a company official told AFP.

He said American has "multiple layers of protection" for passengers including required face coverings, enhanced cleaning procedures, and a "pre-flight COVID-19 symptom checklist."

The company is also suggesting that customers change their travel plans, at no cost until September 30, when they are informed that their flight will be full.

Delta said Friday it will continue to block off middle seats until that same date. Southwest Airlines has taken a similar decision.

A United Airlines spokesman slammed the idea as a "PR strategy", however, pointing out that it does not allow for six feet of space between each passenger.

Other carriers such as JetBlue and Frontier also continue to limit their passenger loads.

Airlines have been devastated as people stopped flying due to international travel restrictions, so carriers are eager to fill domestic routes.

American Airlines defends itself saying it hand-cleans its aircraft thoroughly, including "seat buckles, seats, tray tables and other surfaces."

Like other carriers it says it applies an electrostatic spray inside the aircraft every seven days which "kills 99.9999 pc of viruses and bacteria within 10

minutes," according to the company official.

He said American is the only network airline that uses a product on a government-issued environmental safety list that provides continued seven-day protection against bacteria, mold, and viruses including the one that causes COVID-19.

And the air filtration system on American planes changes the air completely every two to four minutes, similar to the standard for hospitals, this official said.

Asked by AFP about the lack of overall rules for flying, the Federal Aviation Administration said it has been "clear that passengers should wear face coverings while traveling by air, for their own protection and the protection of those around them."

It said it expects people to follow precautions recommended by the CDC and the International Civil Aviation Organization.

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