

US sequester furloughs delay flights, threaten airport safety

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US airports began feeling the impact Monday of the cuts imposed by the sequester, a day after the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) began to furlough air traffic controllers. By Monday afternoon, flight delays and cancellations were noticeable in and out of airports in Washington, DC, New York, Boston and Charlotte. Some flights headed into Los Angeles's LAX were delayed by more than three hours Sunday night.

The FAA is cutting \$637 million as part of the sequestration order signed into law by President Obama on March 1. Overall, the order mandates \$85 billion in federal spending through September. It will affect federal workers' jobs across a wide range of government departments, as well as impose deep cuts to education, housing and many social programs and services depended upon by millions of people. (See "Communities across the US feel impact of sequestration cuts")

Ten percent of the FAA's controller workforce—about 1,500 controllers—were required to take an unpaid day off Monday. Some Transportation Security Administration (TSA) workers were also forced to take unpaid furloughs, causing peak-hour backups at security checkpoints. The FAA expects to achieve \$200 million of the \$637 million it must ax from its budget through the airport furloughs.

The FAA estimates that a full third of all passengers will face delays as a result of the furloughs. The agency is projecting that up to 6,700 flights at more than a dozen major airports will be delayed each day, more than double the toll on the worst travel day in 2012, when severe weather caused about 3,000 delayed flights.

The worst delays are expected at the busiest hub airports, including the three serving New York, two in Chicago, and those serving San Diego, Los Angeles,

San Francisco, Miami, Charlotte, Atlanta, Philadelphia and Fort Lauderdale, Florida. On good days at these locations, passengers have already come to expect delays with predictable regularity.

By midday Monday, airlines had cancelled 19 flights bound for New York's LaGuardia Airport, and some flights there were being delayed by an average of nearly two hours due to "wind" and "volume." The "volume" delays suggest the reduced staffing of control towers is to blame.

In addition to the LaGuardia cancellations, by midday Monday seven flights bound for the DC area's Reagan National had been cancelled, along with five at Boston's Logan airport and five in Charlotte, North Carolina.

With fewer controllers to monitor traffic, the distance between aircraft needs to be lengthened—a method referred to as "traffic metering"—or planes must be directed to take more circuitous routes to spread out takeoffs and landings. Philadelphia, Charlotte and Reagan National briefly exhibited traffic metering efforts Monday morning.

The sequester-imposed furloughs are not only subjecting air traffic controllers to significant cuts in pay, but are threatening the safety of air travel. A plan to close 149 air traffic control towers at smaller airports nationwide was put on hold temporarily earlier this month, but is expected to go forward mid-June.

Despite some bickering between the Obama administration and Congressional Republicans over how to distribute the cuts, they are in agreement that sequestration should serve as the new baseline for the type and volume of spending cuts that must be imposed to jobs and services in the interest of "deficit reduction."

In particular, the two big business parties are eyeing

Social Security and Medicare for deep cutbacks through means testing, raising the age of eligibility, cutting cost-of-living increases and other measures that will severely reduce benefits for millions of seniors.

The Obama administration's attitude to the cuts at the FAA and the reckless disregard for passenger safety was summed up by White House press secretary Jay Carney on Monday. He commented that the Transportation Department, which includes the FAA, "is required by law to cut about \$1 billion. Furloughs cannot be avoided."

Furloughed air traffic controllers are among the more than 1 million federal workers who are set to begin unpaid furloughs this month, which could amount to pay cuts of anywhere from 20 to 30 percent. Sequestration has also prompted the extension of a pay freeze already in force for federal workers.

On Sunday, the National Park Service began requiring police who guard monuments in Washington and other landmarks to take eight hours of unpaid leave every other week. The agency has also implemented a hiring freeze on permanent staff and will employ about 1,000 fewer seasonal workers this fiscal year.

The Smithsonian museums—which will see a \$41 million sequester cut—will be forced to close some art galleries on a rotating basis due to lack of security beginning May 1. The National Museum of African American History and Culture, scheduled to open in November 2015, will likely see delays in construction, fundraising and hiring.

The Internal Revenue Service faces a sequester cut of more than \$600 million. All of the agency's nearly 90,000 employees are facing between five and seven unpaid furlough days between May and September. On the designated dates, all "public-facing operations," including toll-free help lines and taxpayer assistance centers, will be shut down.

Public education will see one of the biggest hits from sequestration, with about \$3 billion cut from K-12 education. The National Education Association estimates that over 30,000 teachers and school faculty will lose their jobs as a result.

Overall, the Congressional Budget Office projects that the sequester will lead to the equivalent of 750,000 full-time job losses throughout the economy. At the same time, states are already beginning to implement 11 percent sequester cuts to federal extended

unemployment benefits depended upon by the nearly four million long-term jobless across America.



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