

Failure of antiquated flight safety system shut down all US air travel Wednesday

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Nearly ten thousand commercial flights in the US were grounded early Wednesday after a key safety communications system operated by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) became inoperable.

The FAA ordered a ground stop that lasted for several hours after the Notice to Air Missions (NOTAM) system—a platform that provides real-time alerts and technical information to aviation personnel about flight hazards and other conditions—suddenly became incapable of accepting updates at 8:45 p.m. on Tuesday. The system eventually had to be rebooted at 2:00 a.m. Wednesday.

According to FlightAware, an airline tracking service, more than 9,700 US departures were delayed and 1,300 flights were cancelled on Wednesday resulting in chaos at airports across the country as travelers were left stranded and confused about what was going on.

Several major airlines such as Delta, American and United announced on Wednesday that they were waiving fees associated with passenger flight changes due to the delays and cancellations. According to media reports, international flights to and from Europe were not impacted because the planes had already taken off before the outage and had alternative systems in place to transmit the information.

While the pause was lifted by 9:00 a.m. on Wednesday, the collapse of a critical information system that provides updates on things such as military flights, runway closures, bird hazards, low-altitude construction and numerous other obstacles revealed the decrepit state of the US transportation infrastructure. A tool that was adopted in the US as an indispensable air safety system in 1947 was transformed into its opposite on Wednesday morning.

According to an unnamed aviation official who spoke to CBS News, the failure of NOTAM is a “major safety

issue.” Aviation experts also told the Associated Press they could not recall a technology breakdown causing an outage of this scale.

Tim Campbell, a former senior vice president of air operations at American Airlines and now a consultant in Minneapolis, told AP, “Periodically there have been local issues here or there, but this is pretty significant historically.”

Former pilot and aviation safety expert John Cox told the AP that the subject of modernizing the NOTAM system has been discussed for years. “I’ve been flying 53 years. I’ve never heard the system go down like this. So, something unusual happened,” Cox said.

Peter Greenberg of CBS News reported that the last time flights were grounded for so long was in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

As of this writing, no official explanation has been provided by the FAA for the failure. Pete Buttigieg, US Secretary of Transportation told CNN, “We are going to see the ripple effects from that, this morning’s delays, working through the system during the day.” Buttigieg had no idea what the source of the problem was, saying, “Now we have to understand how this could have happened in the first place.”

Later, after the transportation secretary came under public scrutiny for the failure, Buttigieg resorted to innuendo, saying federal authorities were not dismissing the possibility of “nefarious activity” in the NOTAM system failure. Stopping short of blaming a cyberattack for the disaster, Buttigieg said, “we are not yet prepared to rule that out.”

However, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre tweeted, “There is no evidence of a cyberattack at this point, but the President directed DOT to conduct a full investigation into the causes. The FAA will provide regular updates.”

NBC News reported that the source of the problem was traced to a corrupted data file, according to an unnamed senior government official. The FAA also issued a statement that said the agency was “continuing a thorough review to determine the root cause” of the NOTAM system outage. The agency said, “Our preliminary work has traced the outage to a damaged database file. At this time, there is no evidence of a cyber attack.”

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Actually, the antiquated state of the NOTAM system is well known. Tim Campbell said, “So much of their systems are old mainframe systems that are generally reliable, but they are out of date,” and he added that there has long been concern about the FAA’s technology and not just the NOTAM system.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported that the US Travel Association is calling for upgrades to the American transportation systems. Geoff Freeman, chief executive of the travel association, wrote, “Today’s FAA catastrophic system failure is a clear sign that America’s transportation network desperately needs significant upgrades.”

The collapse of the FAA’s NOTAM system is the second time in a month that the failure of a key information technology component resulted in dangerous chaos in US air travel. Days before Christmas 2022, a severe winter storm resulted in nearly 20,000 flights being cancelled. The crisis was centered at Southwest Airlines, where the computerized crew-assignment system failed under the impact of a surge in the volume of data scheduling changes.

Workers in the airline industry and air travelers are rightfully asking why, after decades have passed and many billions have been spent on the Transportation Safety Administration (TSA), the basic tools of airline safety have been left by the US government and the airline industry to languish in a state of obsolescence.

Additionally, the public has a right to know why—after trillions of US dollars have been spent on military technology over the decades, including the presently approved \$700 million on each of 100 B-21 nuclear armed stealth bombers—their safety in air travel hangs in the balance on computerized systems that are decades old and unable to function.

These questions are bound up with the crisis of the

capitalist system, which continuously elevates profits over human life and subordinates fundamental issues of health and safety to the insatiable drive by the financial elite for ever-greater wealth accumulation.



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