

Return of Gridlock

By Capt. Duane Woerth, ALPA President

Six years ago, the U.S. public was outraged by



the staggering number of U.S. air traffic delays. Congress held multiple hearings on the subject, and I testified more than six times in just a few months. The annual cost of delays was estimated at nearly \$5 billion. The Canadian Parliament was concerned as well, particularly because chronic delays at Toronto affected the entire North American air transportation system. In

both countries, several airline managements were coerced into reducing schedules and de-optimizing hub banks, especially during peak late-afternoon times.

Just when the system appeared to be achieving total gridlock, the tragic events of Sept. 11, 2001, occurred, dramatically reducing its capacity for nearly three years. In the last two years, however, traffic has returned to all-time highs. Once thunderstorm season begins, air traffic delays will likely set new records.

Since 1998, ALPA has placed national airspace modernization in the top tier of its strategic planning goals. In 1999, when the FAA would not implement to our satisfaction procedures for land-and-hold-short operations (LAHSO), I called for a total boycott of LAHSO until our demands were met. The near total support for that boycott among our pilot ranks demonstrated that ALPA would never compromise safety to increase capacity.



What we need now to unlock gridlock in the air and provide precision approaches to every runway is to transfer from radar-based to satellite-based systems. Thankfully, a generation of new technologies, including the global positioning system and other space-based systems, waits in the wings to support the rapid expansion of airline traffic (see "RNAV and RNP in the NAS," page 18).

As co-chairman of the committee that oversees the Next Generation Air Transport System (NGATS) Institute, an industry group that advocates for improving the ATC system, I am pushing for robust federal funding for transition to NGATS. We need to transform air traffic management for two monumental reasons. First, NGATS would allow the ATC system to triple air traffic capacity within the next 20 years. Translation: More pilot jobs. Second, NGATS would improve safety by empowering pilots in cockpits to play a key role in traffic management. Translation: Increased pilot situational awareness and control.

Today's air transportation system cannot meet 21st-cen-



ture needs. Every panel of experts that has studied

this issue, including the National Research Council and the Commission on the Future of the U.S. Aerospace Industry, has reached that conclusion. Every dollar spent to maintain legacy systems at the expense of NGATS is a dollar—and an opportunity—wasted.

The first step toward implementation, and it was a baby step at best, came in December 2003, when Congress en-

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acted the Vision 100—Century of Aviation Reauthorization Act, which calls for an integrated, multi-agency plan to transform the U.S. air transportation system by 2025. Unfortunately, the Act did not contain any realistic plan to pay for the process, a critical failing.

That the federal government adopts these systems is not enough. We also need it to recognize the pivotal role airlines play in our economy and to fund the NGATS transition from the general treasury. The payback in future tax revenues from economic growth would more than justify the investment. If government fails to achieve proper balance with all stakeholders, improvements will elude us. Translation: Airlines pay and pilots lose.

Current debate is focusing on how taxes and user fees will fund both the current system and the transition to the new system. Airlines paid just under \$9 billion, or 94 percent, of the cost of ATC services in fiscal year 2004 while using only 69 percent of them. General and business aviation paid 6 percent of ATC services despite using 24 percent, with military and government flights using the remaining 7 percent of ATC services. If airlines had paid only for the services they used, they would have saved between \$1.5 and \$2 billion.

I will continue to use my position as co-chairman at the NGATS Institute to help force timely decisions on which technologies will be used and on what time line. I will use my positions as ALPA President and Chairman of ALPA-PAC to make sure elected officials from both parties understand that how these systems are funded is equally important to airline pilots.