



| THE PLANE TRUTH PART 4

**Complaints against U.S. airlines will break another record in 2023.
Cancellations have improved but delays, mishandled luggage
and damaged wheelchairs are worse**

U.S. PIRG
Education Fund

The Plane Truth Part 4

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**CONSUMER WATCHDOG
U.S. PIRG EDUCATION FUND**

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| EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The complaints are pouring in. The Department of Transportation (DOT) has finally [released details on passenger complaints](#) for the first five months of 2023. Following a record-breaking 2022, complaints against U.S. airlines have more than doubled from January through May 2023 compared with the same period last year. Overall, complaints against the entire industry – U.S. and foreign airlines, travel agents and tour operators – increased by 68%. The number of passengers on U.S. airlines for the same period is up about 14%.

What are travelers complaining about? Nearly 35% of complaints from January through May were about flight problems, meaning cancellations, delays or missed connections. Refunds – or the lack of – made up an additional 20% of complaints. Complaints about lost or damaged baggage or wheelchairs came in third, at nearly 16% of complaints. These percentages are similar to what we saw throughout 2022.

Clearly, we're on pace for another record year for complaints. The volume this year has so overwhelmed DOT's Office of Aviation Consumer Protection that it said it was unable to tally and release data this year on anything close to its normal schedule, which is generally six weeks after the end of a month. Complaints through May were released more than three months late.

Complaints give regulators and travelers a window into the biggest problems, and the

best and worst airlines. The question now is – in this fourth consecutive year of airlines angering customers in numbers never experienced before 2020 – what will regulators and lawmakers do about issues that clearly need to be addressed?

Key findings:

- Cancellations January through September improved significantly compared with the same period last year, dropping from 2.6% of flights to 1.5%. That's great news.
- But delays are a bigger problem than in 2022, particularly when they cause passengers to miss connections.
- Incidents of lost or damaged bags were up slightly over the same period last year, and were up significantly during the heart of the busy summer.
- The rate of mishandled wheelchairs is just as bad this year as last and was up the last two months for which data is available.
- Flights were more crowded. The number of flights January through September increased by 4% but passenger volume increased by 11%.

All of this, and the fact that airports and airplanes aren't likely to become less crowded anytime soon, makes it more important than ever for travelers to proactively try to avoid headaches, and know what to do if they occur.

COMPLAINTS MORE THAN DOUBLE AGAINST U.S. CARRIERS

For the first five months of 2023, travelers filed 38,135 complaints against U.S. and foreign airlines, travel agents and tour operators. That's up 68% from the same period last year.

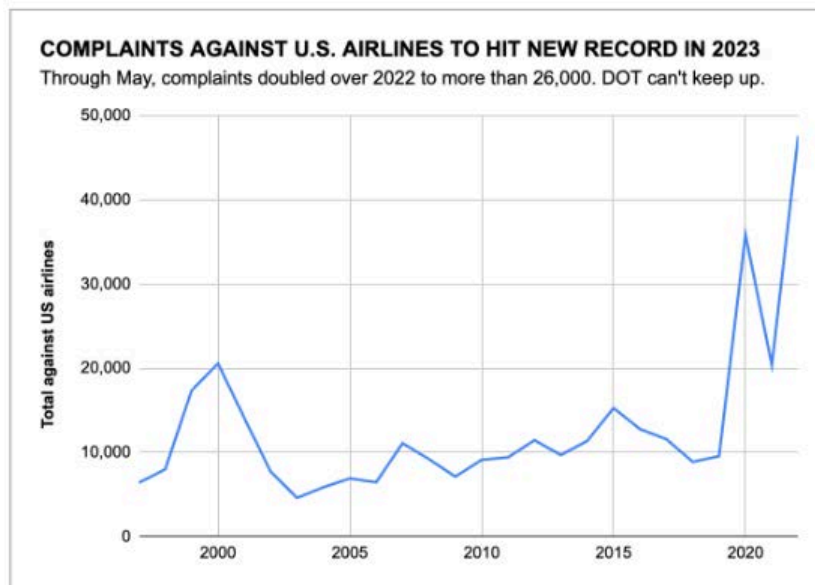
Of those, 26,312 were against U.S. airlines. That's up 109% -- more than double the total from the same period last year.

To further demonstrate how large that number is: Until 2020, DOT had tallied more than 20,000 complaints against U.S. airlines only one time *for the entire year*. (That was in 2000.) The complaints filed against U.S. airlines for the first five months of this year topped the 12-month totals for any year before 2020.

Of the major categories, complaints about cancellations/delays and mishandled baggage more than doubled for the first five months of 2023 compared with 2022.

Complaints about refunds declined by nearly 12%, but there were still nearly 6,000. For sure, that's far less than the nearly 90,000 refund complaints filed in all of 2020. But it's unacceptable that there are *any* issues with refunds being issued promptly when a flight is canceled, especially when it's the law.

Other categories of complaints include: fares, reservations/ticketing, customer service, disability, bumping, discrimination, advertising and animals.



I BEST AND WORST AIRLINES FOR COMPLAINTS

A key set of data in the monthly reports looks at the volume of complaints for the largest airlines, per 100,000 boarded passengers. This gives us an apples-to-apples view, regardless of the size of the airline. For this year, DOT looked at the 15 U.S. operating airlines with at least 0.5% of total domestic scheduled service passenger revenues.

It's important to realize that complaints to DOT are supposed to be filed only by travelers who had an issue *and* couldn't get it resolved through the airline.

In May, the latest month available, Republic fared best, followed by SkyWest, Alaska and Southwest. All had complaint ratios of less than 2 per 100,000 boarded passengers. Republic is a codeshare partner airline for American, Delta and United. SkyWest is a partner airline for Alaska, American, Delta and United.

On the other end, Frontier's ratio of complaints was more than 16 times higher than the four best, at 33.5 per 100,000. Besides Frontier, Spirit also had double-digit complaint ratios each month for January through May.

Meanwhile, there was wide variance among the four largest airlines. Southwest fared best, followed by Delta.

American's and United's ratios were more than twice as high as Delta's.

Frontier's complaint ratio is worse than what the budget carrier posted last year. For all of 2022, Frontier Airlines had 20.3 complaints per 100,000 boarded passengers. That was twice as high as the next airline and more than three times higher than Frontier had in 2021.

COMPLAINTS PER 100,000 PASSENGERS IN MAY 2023

| | |
|------------------|-------------|
| Frontier | 33.5 |
| Spirit | 13.0 |
| Hawaiian | 10.7 |
| Jetblue | 9.1 |
| United | 6.1 |
| Allegiant | 5.9 |
| American | 5.5 |
| Envoy | 4.5 |
| PSA | 4.1 |
| Delta | 2.6 |
| Endeavor | 2.4 |
| Southwest | 1.8 |
| Alaska | 1.8 |
| SkyWest | 1.7 |
| Republic | 1.4 |

We know that only a fraction of consumers actually file complaints about anything – it's just human nature – even though the process through DOT is easy online or by phone. Travelers can file complaints against U.S. airlines, foreign airlines, travel agents, tour operators or others.

Airlines are then required to acknowledge complaints filed with the DOT within 30 days and respond in writing within 60 days. Ticket agents are also expected to respond to consumer complaints, although there's no timeline for replies.

IN MAY, FRONTIER HAD MORE ACTUAL COMPLAINTS THAN ANY OTHER AIRLINE

DOT tallies each complaint filed in a month and discloses them for each individual airline that receives five or more. Frontier's total exceed any other airline, even though Frontier is the eighth largest carrier and the big four are more than five times larger.

Complaints in May:

| | |
|-----------------------------|--------------|
| TOTAL MAY 2023 | 4,425 |
| FRONTIER AIRLINES | 854 |
| AMERICAN AIRLINES | 775 |
| UNITED AIRLINES | 705 |
| SPIRIT AIRLINES | 495 |
| DELTA AIR LINES | 375 |
| JETBLUE AIRWAYS | 345 |
| SOUTHWEST AIRLINES | 279 |
| HAWAIIAN AIRLINES | 99 |
| ALLEGiant AIR | 84 |
| SKYWEST AIRLINES | 55 |
| ALASKA AIRLINES | 54 |
| ENVOY AIR | 52 |
| SILVER AIRWAYS | 47 |
| PSA AIRLINES | 40 |
| BREEZE AIRWAYS | 39 |
| ENDEAVOR AIR | 26 |
| REPUBLIC AIRWAYS | 23 |
| AVELO AIRLINES | 20 |
| SUN COUNTRY AIRLINES | 17 |
| OTHER U.S. AIRLINES | 17 |
| PIEDMONT AIRLINES | 11 |
| SOUTHERN AIRWAYS | 8 |
| MOKULELE AIRLINES | 5 |

COMPLAINTS AGAINST TICKET AGENTS DROP

While complaints filed against foreign airlines from January through May also increased, by 37%, complaints against ticket agents from January through May, declined by 38%. Consumers filed 1,720 complaints, down from 2,767 during the same period the year before.

Some of the more popular online ticket agents include Booking.com, Expedia, Priceline and Travelocity.

This follows a few rough years for travel/ticket agents. Starting in 2020, they were blasted for not issuing refunds promptly when flights were canceled en masse during COVID and thereafter because of issues with airline staffing or bad weather.

While the third-party websites can help travelers find great deals on airline tickets

(as well as hotels and other travel options,) the companies often finger-point when a refund is legally owed.

Airlines are required to refund tickets for canceled flights within seven days if paid by credit card; no such deadline exists for ticket agents. In some cases, the ticket agents haven't yet been refunded by the airline. In some cases, they're just dragging their feet. It's a huge issue that needs to be addressed.

As with airlines, the DOT expects ticket agents to respond to complaints filed with the regulator. But unlike airlines that have deadlines, ticket agents have no timelines to respond to customers. For a glimpse at the largest players the chart below shows complaints filed with DOT in January.

| TRAVEL AGENTS | REFUND COMPLAINTS | TOTAL JAN COMPLAINTS |
|---------------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| AIRTKT.COM | 2 | 6 |
| ASAPTICKETS.COM | 7 | 15 |
| BOOKING.COM | 13 | 17 |
| BUDGETAIR.COM | 4 | 6 |
| CHASE TRAVEL | 4 | 7 |
| CHEAPOAIR.COM | 18 | 34 |
| EXPEDIA.COM | 55 | 89 |
| FLIGHT NETWORK | 4 | 5 |
| GOTOGATE | 18 | 23 |
| HOPPER.COM | 5 | 5 |
| JUSTFLY.COM | 14 | 24 |
| KIWI.COM | 30 | 39 |
| OOJO.COM | 4 | 7 |
| ORBITZ.COM | 10 | 19 |
| PRICELINE.COM | 14 | 25 |
| SMARTFARES.COM | 4 | 7 |
| SOUTHWEST VACATIONS | 5 | 16 |
| TRAVELOCITY.COM | 14 | 21 |
| TRIP.COM | 4 | 5 |
| OTHER TRAVEL AGENTS | 72 | 99 |
| TOTALS | 301 | 469 |

I AVOIDING A REPEAT OF CHRISTMAS 2022

As we go into another holiday travel season, we're all hoping we don't have another meltdown, as occurred over the Christmas holidays last year. Poor planning, combined with a winter storm and a technology disaster at Southwest Airlines, ruined holiday plans for millions of families. More than 25,000 flights were cancelled from Dec. 22 through Dec. 29, 2022. Too many families spent the holiday weekend sleeping on the floor in airports. Many travelers missed the holidays with loved ones. Others couldn't get home for several days after the storm. For December overall, 5.4% of flights were canceled, triple the norm.

To get an idea of what could happen this Christmas, we can look at 2023's busy summer travel season – June, July and August. For virtually all issues that DOT reports publicly, it provides data for the 10 largest airlines and their codeshare

marketing partner airlines; some of the larger partners include SkyWest, Republic, Envoy, Endeavor and PSA.

In 2023, on-time performance for the 10 largest airlines and their partner airlines was worse in June and July but better in August, compared with 2022. On-time performance reflects domestic flights that weren't canceled or delayed by more than 15 minutes.

With on-time arrivals, it may not matter much if a flight arrives late by less than 15 minutes, but more than 25% of flights arrived late this summer, [by an average of 57 minutes](#), according to information from FlightAware. A delay of nearly an hour can and often does make the difference between catching or missing a connecting flight. That can have a whole domino effect on various airlines and travelers for whom missing a flight could mean they miss a wedding, a cruise or other important event.

SUMMER 2023 FLIGHTS IN U.S. FOR TOP 10

ON TIME:

| | | | |
|-----------|--------------|-----------|-------|
| June 2023 | 71.3% worse | June 2022 | 73.5 |
| July 2023 | 69.6% worse | July 2022 | 74.9% |
| Aug 2023 | 77.2% better | Aug 2022 | 75.6% |

CANCELLATIONS:

| | | | |
|-----------|-------------|-----------|------|
| June 2023 | 2.1% better | June 2022 | 3.1% |
| July 2023 | 2.5% worse | July 2022 | 1.8% |
| Aug 2023 | 1.5% better | Aug 2022 | 2.5% |

I BEST AND WORST AIRLINES FOR ON-TIME PERFORMANCE AND CANCELLATIONS

For on-time performance, for January through September 2023, the 10 largest airlines and their partner airlines collectively posted a slightly worse record – 76.2% compared with 76.5% in 2022. This means that nearly one in four flights did not arrive on time through September. That added up to nearly 1.3 million flights.

Delta had the best on-performance for the January through September timeframe, at 81.2%. **Frontier** had the worst, at 63.2%.

This past summer, the top 10 airlines and their partner airlines posted an average on-time arrival performance of 71.3% in June, 69.6% in July and 77.2% in August.

For June, July and August, the three best airlines were the same each month, although the order varied: **Alaska, Delta and Hawaiian**. All had on-time performances well above the averages. The three airlines with the worst on-time performance were also same every month of the summer, although again, the order varied: **Frontier, Jetblue and Spirit**. All had on-time performances well below the averages.

July had the greatest range in on-time performance, with Hawaiian Airlines’ on-time performance at 82.5%. At the bottom, Jetblue Airways had an on-time record of 49.5%. The latest performance data available as of Dec. 7 was for September.

| RANK | CARRIER ¹ | JANUARY - SEPTEMBER 2023 | | JANUARY - SEPTEMBER 2022 | |
|--------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | | FLIGHT OPERATIONS SCHEDULED | PERCENT OF ON-TIME ARRIVALS | FLIGHT OPERATIONS SCHEDULED | PERCENT OF ON-TIME ARRIVALS |
| 1 | DELTA AIR LINES NETWORK | 1,114,196 | 81.23 | 1,096,319 | 81.76 |
| | - DELTA AIR LINES | 738,244 | 79.92 | 665,547 | 82.03 |
| | - BRANDED CODESHARE PARTNERS | 375,952 | 83.82 | 430,772 | 81.34 |
| 2 | ALASKA AIRLINES NETWORK | 291,397 | 80.26 | 291,857 | 80.23 |
| | - ALASKA AIRLINES | 186,383 | 78.32 | 169,799 | 78.78 |
| | - BRANDED CODESHARE PARTNERS | 105,014 | 83.71 | 122,058 | 82.25 |
| 3 | AMERICAN AIRLINES NETWORK | 1,315,529 | 76.86 | 1,338,279 | 76.54 |
| | - AMERICAN AIRLINES | 707,372 | 73.55 | 646,491 | 74.26 |
| | - BRANDED CODESHARE PARTNERS | 608,157 | 80.72 | 691,788 | 78.67 |
| 4 | UNITED AIRLINES NETWORK | 974,632 | 75.80 | 953,408 | 78.17 |
| | - UNITED AIRLINES | 548,575 | 74.97 | 457,820 | 78.43 |
| | - BRANDED CODESHARE PARTNERS | 426,057 | 76.86 | 495,588 | 77.94 |
| 5 | SOUTHWEST AIRLINES | 1,059,603 | 75.34 | 963,224 | 72.88 |
| 6 | HAWAIIAN AIRLINES | 60,729 | 73.19 | 54,788 | 81.02 |
| | - HAWAIIAN AIRLINES | 60,729 | 73.19 | - | - |
| 7 | ALLEGiant AIR | 87,476 | 71.28 | 89,803 | 62.84 |
| 8 | SPIRIT AIRLINES | 194,830 | 66.89 | 168,912 | 72.87 |
| 9 | JETBLUE AIRWAYS | 210,107 | 64.91 | 202,362 | 63.87 |
| 10 | FRONTIER AIRLINES | 128,670 | 63.23 | 113,406 | 66.91 |
| TOTAL | | 5,437,169 | 76.18 | 5,272,358 | 76.46 |

Meanwhile, the cancellation rates for the top 10 and their partner airlines was 2.1% for June, 2.5% for July and 1.5% for August.

With cancellation rates, below 1% is great. Higher than 3% isn't good.

For those three summer months, Alaska and Allegiant were among the best every month, with cancellation rates of 1% or less.

Southwest posted cancellation rates of less than 1% in June and July. And Hawaiian and United had a cancellation rate of less than 1% for one month of the summer.

On the flip side, Frontier and Jetblue had among the worst cancellation rates each of the three months, at 3.9%, 4.5% and 5% for

Frontier and 3.5%, 6.8% and 2.9% for Jetblue. United had cancellation rates exceeding 3% two of the summer months.

For the year to date available, January through September 2023, [1.6% of flights](#) were canceled among the 10 largest airlines and their partner airlines, much better than the 2.8% cancellation rate for the same period last year and the best in the last six years.

However, that still means that 88,419 flights were canceled for a variety of reasons through the first nine months of 2023. Sometimes it's bad weather. Sometimes it's staffing or equipment issues. Sometimes the reason isn't publicly known.

| RANK | CARRIER ¹ | JANUARY - SEPTEMBER 2023 | | | JANUARY - SEPTEMBER 2022 | | |
|------|------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| | | FLIGHT OPERATIONS SCHEDULED | FLIGHT OPERATIONS CANCELLED | PERCENT OF OPERATIONS CANCELLED | FLIGHT OPERATIONS SCHEDULED | FLIGHT OPERATIONS CANCELLED | PERCENT OF OPERATIONS CANCELLED |
| 1 | ALASKA AIRLINES NETWORK | 291,397 | 2,312 | 0.79 | 291,857 | 5,422 | 1.86 |
| | - ALASKA AIRLINES | 186,383 | 1,715 | 0.92 | 169,799 | 4,060 | 2.39 |
| | - BRANDED CODESHARE PARTNERS | 105,014 | 597 | 0.57 | 122,058 | 1,362 | 1.12 |
| 2 | ALLEGIANT AIR | 87,476 | 697 | 0.80 | 89,803 | 3,317 | 3.69 |
| 3 | SOUTHWEST AIRLINES | 1,059,603 | 12,988 | 1.23 | 963,224 | 23,304 | 2.42 |
| 4 | HAWAIIAN AIRLINES | 60,729 | 774 | 1.27 | 54,788 | 370 | 0.68 |
| 5 | AMERICAN AIRLINES NETWORK | 1,315,529 | 19,527 | 1.48 | 1,338,279 | 44,353 | 3.31 |
| | - AMERICAN AIRLINES | 707,372 | 9,497 | 1.34 | 646,491 | 23,341 | 3.61 |
| | - BRANDED CODESHARE PARTNERS | 608,157 | 10,030 | 1.65 | 691,788 | 21,012 | 3.04 |
| 6 | DELTA AIR LINES NETWORK | 1,114,196 | 17,677 | 1.59 | 1,096,319 | 23,956 | 2.19 |
| | - DELTA AIR LINES | 738,244 | 9,926 | 1.34 | 665,547 | 11,658 | 1.75 |
| | - BRANDED CODESHARE PARTNERS | 375,952 | 7,751 | 2.06 | 430,772 | 12,298 | 2.85 |
| 7 | SPIRIT AIRLINES | 194,830 | 3,942 | 2.02 | 168,912 | 5,088 | 3.01 |
| 8 | UNITED AIRLINES NETWORK | 974,632 | 21,339 | 2.19 | 953,408 | 29,557 | 3.10 |
| | - UNITED AIRLINES | 548,575 | 9,999 | 1.82 | 457,820 | 9,818 | 2.14 |
| | - BRANDED CODESHARE PARTNERS | 426,057 | 11,340 | 2.66 | 495,588 | 19,739 | 3.98 |
| 9 | JETBLUE AIRWAYS | 210,107 | 5,613 | 2.67 | 202,362 | 8,975 | 4.44 |
| 10 | FRONTIER AIRLINES | 128,670 | 3,550 | 2.76 | 113,406 | 3,191 | 2.81 |
| | TOTAL | 5,437,169 | 88,419 | 1.63 | 5,272,358 | 147,533 | 2.80 |

All of that said, we don't know the actual number of flights canceled this year (or any day) because the DOT doesn't tally them unless they're canceled within a week before departure. When a flight gets canceled more than seven days in advance, DOT considers

it "discontinued," not canceled. And DOT doesn't track them. The airlines still owe customers refunds, but there are no consequences.

So while a flight that gets canned eight or 10 days before your trip might be a hassle to rebook – possibly facing higher prices or no available seats – it doesn't count against the airline. This little-known fact about “discontinued” flights had been kept largely under wraps until cancellations started becoming such an enormous problem last year. Even some veteran consumer advocates didn't learn this until 2022.

Yes, airlines are held accountable if they have too many canceled flights, but not the ones DOT doesn't track.

This overlaps with another issue that popped up in the last year: A DOT investigation into four domestic airlines for possible “unrealistic scheduling.” The investigation was [announced in February](#). One of the airlines is Southwest; the other three aren't publicly known. Unrealistic scheduling is considered an unfair and deceptive practice. It's not publicly known what sanctions, if any, that an offending airline might face.

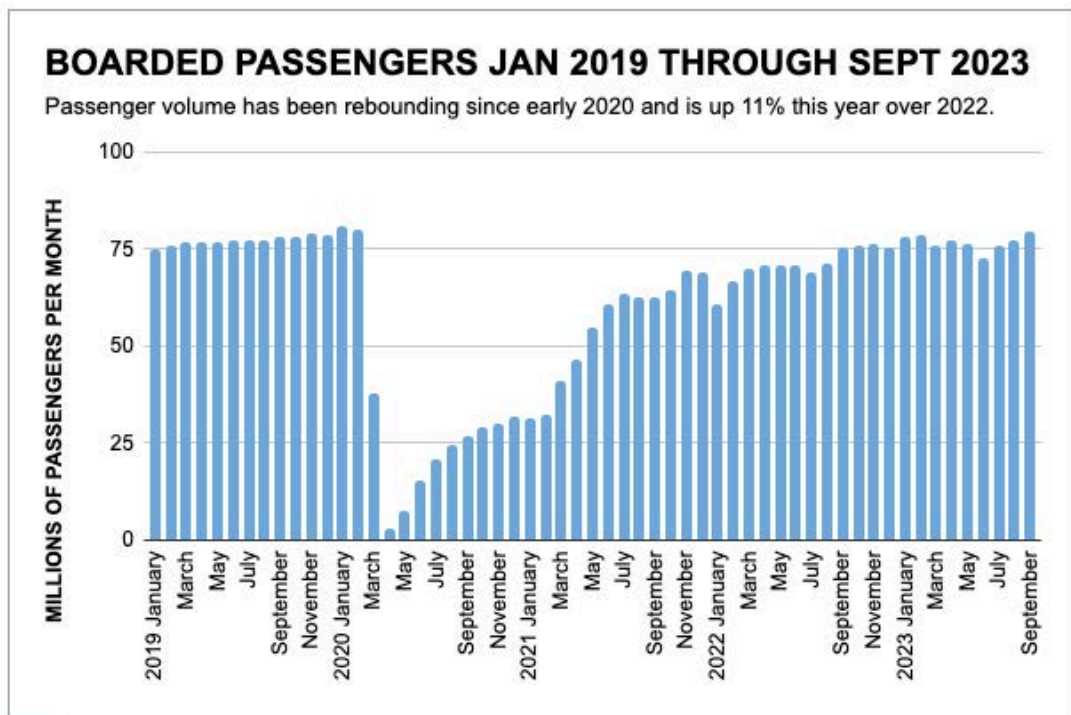
I MORE PEOPLE ARE FLYING

Continuing the trend we've seen since 2020, millions more people are flying every month than flew in the same month the year before. From January through September 2023, the number of boarded passengers increased to nearly 700 million, up from about 625 million during the same period in 2022.

In addition, flights are more crowded. The number of flights this year increased by 4%, but passenger volume increased by 11%.

Airline travel is on pace to hit a new record high in 2023. The previous all-time high on U.S. airlines was between 927 million and 928 million passengers systemwide (domestic and international) in 2019.

Given the 11% increase in boarded passengers this year, even if volume the rest of 2023 increases only half of that compared with last year, we would surpass 2019's record number of airline passengers.



I MORE PEOPLE ARE GETTING BUMPED

Yes, flights are fuller these days. To maximize revenue, airlines are allowed to and often do oversell tickets. They calculate, based on algorithms, that a certain number of passengers won't show up for a specific flight, either for personal reasons or because their previous flight arrived too late for travelers to catch the connecting flight. Those no-show predictions often hold close to reality.

But when too many passengers do show up for a particular flight, airlines usually ask for volunteers and offer another flight plus compensation of varying amounts to those who give up their seats willingly. If there are still more passengers than seats, the airline starts bumping people involuntarily (although they are still due compensation by law, up to \$1,550 per person if they are delayed getting to their destination by more than two hours.)

The DOT reports bumping stats every quarter. The just-released January through September data show the number of passengers who boarded the top 10 airlines and their partner airlines increased by 11%, to 644.6 million.

Nearly 8,000 passengers were bumped involuntarily from July through September 2023. The ratio bumped involuntarily from July through September increased notably, from 0.22 per 10,000 passengers last year, to 0.35 per 10,000 passengers this year.

Number of passengers bumped involuntarily, January - September:

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--------------|
| Frontier: | 9,290 |
| American: | 8,114 |
| Southwest: | 2,433 |
| Spirit: | 1,032 |
| Other 6 big airlines combined: | 845 |

When you look at voluntary and involuntary bumping *combined*, the ratio increased from 0.32 for July through September 2022, to 0.43 for that same period in 2023.

Overall, nearly 98,000 passengers were bumped either voluntarily or involuntarily from July through September 2023, compared with about 67,000 during the same period of 2022.

For January through September 2023, nearly 273,000 passengers were bumped voluntarily or involuntarily, up from about 248,000 during the same period in 2022.

Sure, some of the volunteers may not have minded much, especially if they received some compensation and their schedules weren't disrupted much.

But the total shows the airlines collectively didn't do as good of a job this year predicting how many passengers would show up.

Frontier involuntarily bumped more passengers from July through September and January through September, even though it's much smaller than seven of the other airlines. And its bump rate is the highest by a wide margin. No airline besides Frontier has a bump ratio exceeding 1 per 10,000 passengers for either period. Frontier's is nearly 5 for July through September.

Allegiant didn't involuntarily bump a single passenger from January through September 2023. Hawaiian, a relatively small airline, and Delta, with the second highest number of total passengers behind American, each bumped only three passengers involuntarily.

Frontier also had the [worst record on involuntary bumping in 2022](#), by a wide margin. Meanwhile, Delta, Allegiant and Endeavor didn't have a single passenger who was bumped involuntarily in 2022.

Delta posted the largest number of passengers who *volunteered* to get bumped from January through September 2023 – 123,016. American had the next highest number: 32,447.

Involuntary bumping has been on the rise the last few years. Last year's 0.32 per 10,000 boarded passengers is the highest level since 2017.

Volunteering to get bumped from a flight can put serious money in your pocket, particularly in recent years. For example, in June 2022, Delta oversold a flight from Grand Rapids, Mich., to Minneapolis, Minn.

Eight travelers ended up with [\\$10,000 to give up their seats](#).

On another Delta flight, this one in July from LaGuardia Airport in New York to West Palm Beach, Fla., [travelers were offered up to \\$3,000](#). Airlines seem more willing to offer generous amounts after a terrible incident in 2017.

An overbooked United Airlines flight from Chicago resulted in a [Kentucky doctor being knocked unconscious](#) after airline representatives forcibly removed him from the plane. He declined to give up his seat because he said he had patients to see the next day. He was left bleeding, had teeth knocked out and his glasses were broken. A video of the confrontation went viral on social media. The doctor [settled with United](#) for about \$140 million.

Airlines offer much more modest amounts to people who haven't yet boarded – typically a few hundred or maybe \$1,000 plus another ticket for giving up their seat before boarding.

For passengers who are bumped involuntarily, the airline must provide compensation if the person will be delayed one hour or more.

- For domestic flights with a one- to two-hour delay, the compensation is double your one-way fare, up to \$775.
- If the delay is more than two hours, the compensation is quadruple your one-way fare, up to \$1,550.
- The compensation levels are higher for international flights.

LOST AND DAMAGED LUGGAGE, WHEELCHAIRS AND SCOOTERS

You can gauge problems with luggage, wheelchairs and scooters checked on planes by looking at complaints filed by passengers and incidents recorded by the DOT.

Incidents include only items checked [on direct flights](#), not connecting ones. DOT tallies baggage as mishandled if it's lost, delayed, damaged or has items missing.

For the summer – June, July and August – the 10 largest airlines and their partner airlines handled 130.2 million checked bags. The rate of mishandled bags was marginally better in June and August compared with a year ago, but significantly worse in July.

It was also significantly worse in September 2023 than the year before, with 198,256 bags mishandled out of 37.4 million checked.

For January through September, the mishandled bag rate was a hair higher, 0.62 per 100 in 2023 compared with 0.61 per 100 in 2022. What that means in real terms: of the 362.6 million checked bags, 2.25 million were lost or damaged.

On the complaint side, consumers filed nearly 6,000 complaints about lost and damaged baggage in the first five months of 2023, more than 2-½ times more than in the same period last year. In fact, the January-May complaint total for 2023 was two to three times higher than for the entire year for 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021.

Wheelchairs and scooters

Problems with wheelchairs and scooters are also tallied by the DOT. Compared with the year before, incidents of mishandled wheelchairs and scooters declined in June and July 2023 but increased in August and September.

LOST AND DAMAGED ITEMS

From January through September 2023:
2.25 million checked bags were lost or damaged.
8,637 wheelchairs or scooters were lost or damaged.

From January through May (the latest data available):
Nearly 6,000 consumers filed complaints about lost or damaged baggage.

Reimbursement:

If travelers' bags are lost, pilfered or delayed, they do have rights, including reimbursement for lost items up to \$3,800.

Wheelchairs, CPAP machines, medications and other "assistive devices" are not subject to the \$3,800 liability limit on domestic flights. Limits may vary on international flights.

Overall, from January to September 2023, the ratio of mishandled wheelchairs and scooters was a tinge lower than for that period in 2022, declining slightly from 1.41 to 1.40 mishandled per 100.

What does this mean? Passengers checked 617,537 wheelchairs and scooters, a significant increase from the same period the year before. Of those, 8,637 wheelchairs and scooters were lost, misplaced or damaged.

In just September 2023, a total of 1,035 were mishandled, and the mishandled ratio was up notably, from 1.36 in 2022 to 1.42 per 100.

The DOT wants to step up enforcement against airlines for mishandling a wheelchair. The DOT has [proposed a new rule](#) that would “make it an automatic violation of the Department’s Air Carrier Access Act regulations for airlines to mishandle a passenger’s wheelchair.” The DOT is also [exploring the possibility of allowing passengers](#) to stay in their own wheelchairs on airplanes.

I RECOMMENDATIONS

More than three full years after the pandemic hit and Congress gave the airlines \$54 billion to keep them afloat, some aspects of air travel are on a better trajectory. Cancellations have improved compared with 2022, to the extent we know how many flights are truly being canceled, because DOT tallies only those within one week before departure.

But delays have gotten worse compared with last year. And we have more cases of lost or damaged baggage. Finally, complaints for the first five months doubled compared with 2022. This means that even when problems are brought to the airlines' attention, they're not resolving them.

Here are some of the things that need to happen to improve air travel:

1. Airlines should focus on realistic scheduling, fast refunds for canceled flights, transparent pricing upfront instead of add-on gotcha fees, and quick resolution of problems so consumers don't need to file a complaint.

2. DOT should focus more on accountability from the airlines, particularly regarding scheduling, excessive cancellations and delays, slow-rolled refunds and disproportionately high complaint volume.

The complaint volume paints a clear picture of where change is needed most, both in

terms of the airlines with the most unresolved problems and the practices at various airlines that generate the most complaints.

Frontier had the worst complaint record for the first five months of 2023, and all of 2022. Spirit had the second worst record for four of the five months of 2023 and for all of 2022.

And DOT knows what travelers are complaining about: cancellations, delays, refunds and mishandled baggage.

In February 2023, the DOT said it launched "a rigorous and comprehensive investigation" into possible "unrealistic scheduling" by four airlines, including Southwest, which had a meltdown over the Christmas holidays last year.

Unrealistic scheduling is regarded as "[an unfair and deceptive practice](#)" under federal law, DOT said. We haven't learned about any findings or actions as of Dec. 9. It's irresponsible and harmful if airlines sell tickets to flights in bad faith, because last-minute cancellations can wreak havoc on travelers' lives and wallets.

3. On that note, DOT should revise its definition of a canceled flight to include more than just those canceled within seven days of the departure date. Right now, those are considered "discontinued flights" and DOT doesn't even tally them nor are airlines

accountable for them, despite the disruption they can cause.

4. In its enforcement action in November 2022 against six airlines – Frontier and five foreign carriers – for taking too long to issue \$600 million in refunds, DOT said the \$7.25 million in civil penalties [wouldn't be the last](#) ones if the airlines don't do better and issue timely refunds as legally required.

DOT in 2023 did take action against five other foreign airlines:

- British Airways: [\\$1,100,000 in civil penalties](#) for not issuing refunds promptly after canceling or significantly changing flights to or from the United States from March to November 2020. DOT received 1,200 complaints; British Airways received thousands of additional complaints and requests, DOT said.
- Air Transat: [\\$525,000 in civil penalties](#) for not issuing refunds promptly for flights canceled from March to November 2020. Instead it provided credits. It was not until April 29, 2021 that it allowed consumers who still held those credits to get refunds. DOT received more than 150 complaints.
- Scandinavian Airlines System: [\\$750,000 in civil penalties](#) for not issuing refunds promptly for flights canceled or significantly changed since March 2020. DOT received more than 700 complaints. The

airline received thousands of additional complaints and requests.

- LATAM Airlines Group: [\\$1,000,000 in civil penalties](#) for not issuing refunds promptly after cancelling flights between the United States and certain South American countries from March 2020 through at least November 2021. The company required consumers who requested refunds to obtain a voucher first and then exchange that for cash by means of a bank transfer, which often took more than 100 days. DOT received more than 750 complaints.
- Swoop [\\$175,000 in civil penalties](#) for not issuing refunds promptly for flights canceled from March to October 2020. Refunds for thousands of customers took more than 100 days. DOT received about 250 complaints.

So far, enforcement against U.S. airlines included only one airline – Frontier. We know that other U.S. carriers also dragged out refunds, if they were ever provided, or pushed consumers to vouchers or credits instead of requested refunds. Slow issuance of refunds is in fact still a problem. Consumers need the DOT to do more on this issue and hold airlines accountable.

5. DOT should also demand more accountability from third-party online ticket sellers, who make up a growing percentage of the market but often are a nightmare to deal with if a customer wants a refund for a

canceled flight, or needs to rebook a canceled or delayed flight. In some cases, the ticket sellers or travel agents may not yet have the money back from the airline. DOT needs to intervene because, for sure, travelers shouldn't be the victims here.

6. And DOT should do everything it can to make sure the skies have an adequate number of air traffic controllers. Airlines blame some issues on shortages here.

7. Pilot shortages are also blamed for some of the cancellation/delay issues. All parties should work together to address this.

8. Congress should allow state attorneys general to enforce federal consumer protection laws involving the airlines. The states want to and should be able to do this, but they can't. Airlines are just about the only industry that is protected from state enforcement of consumer protection laws. And a bipartisan group of [35 state attorneys general signed a letter](#) to Congress on this issue in August 2022.

9. The DOT has done a great job the last two years of pushing the major carriers to adopt new passenger-friendly policies, such as family seating so young children can sit next to an adult companion at no additional charge. Other policies deal with the airlines' commitments in cases of cancellations and delays under the airlines' control.

The DOT's [flightrights.gov](https://www.flightrights.gov) dashboard clearly displays each airline's policy on various issues. Further, once the airlines have made a promise like this to the DOT, it becomes part of their contract and, while they can change their policy, they can't go back on it for tickets purchased while that policy was in effect. The hope is that pressure from travelers – who know who offers what – pushes more airlines to adopt such practices.

Airline travel tips you shouldn't fly without

We likely are past the worst, but it's still best to plan for possible problems. Here are some suggestions to help save you grief on your next trip.

If you already booked a flight, you should do four easy but important things:

1. **Download your airline's app.** This will help you get real-time notifications and communicate directly with customer service, especially if you need to rebook your flight and the phone lines are jammed.

If you need to call your airline, do *not* just do an online search for your airline; you could end up on a scam website or calling a scam "customer service" number. This has actually happened!

2. **Put trackers in your bags.** Some of the biggest frustrations for passengers whose flights are canceled or rebooked stem from the airline not knowing where your bag is. It's helpful if you do.

3. **Check where your plane is.** You can often get a heads-up on a problem, or reassurance that everything is on schedule, by checking the day before or the morning of where your plane is coming from or where it is. Go to flightaware.com and search for the flight (don't forget the airline abbreviation.) Find your time and route and go to the link "Where is my plane now?" You'll see what city your plane is in currently and whether it's on time.

4. **Know that you have legal rights.** If any airline cancels your flight for any reason, you're entitled by law to a [full refund](#) of your ticket price, taxes, baggage fees, any extra charges and ancillary fees. Refunds must be issued promptly — if that's what you want. You likely want rebooked. If the cancellation or delay was caused by the airline (such as staffing or equipment issues,) you have additional rights spelled out on the [DOT's passenger dashboard](#). Six of the 10 largest airlines will rebook you on another airline at no charge. Many will pay for hotels, meals, ground transportation, etc., even if it's not their fault, if you ask.

If you have not yet booked your flight, here are important tips to consider:

Tread carefully if using third-party ticket websites

If your flight is canceled or delayed or you need to rebook or get a refund, it may be much more difficult to do so than if you purchased tickets directly from an airline. For sure, you don't have as many rights with a third-party ticket site as you do with an airline. Complaints against ticket/travel agents were 13 times higher in 2022 than in 2019.

Fly in the morning

Schedule your flight as early in the day as possible. The DOT says you're more likely to get where you're going. The later in the day you fly, the more chances there are for the airline to get

off schedule. And if you have a late-night flight that's cancelled, there may not be another one until the next morning.

Download the app

Get the airline's app on your phone at least a few days before your flight. It can help you with last-minute notifications, rebooking and contacting customer service. Then you can delete the app when you return from your trip if you'd like.

Avoid connecting flights

This isn't always possible, of course. But two flights mean two chances for a problem. And a delay on the first leg could mean you miss the second leg. The extra cost of a non-stop may save you a lot of stress and expense.

Give yourself a buffer

If possible, plan to fly out a day before you actually need to be somewhere, particularly if you're attending a wedding or going on a cruise.

Hedge your ticket purchase

Many airlines will allow you to cancel your reservation and get a refund within 24 hours, so you can make sure you get the best deal.

Check the flight's record

Major airlines are required by law to provide on-time performance information on their websites when you consider what flight to buy. Check out the [historic flight record for a specific flight](#) to help avoid long delays. Note: Sometimes a flight number will show up under multiple routes.

The results will show you each city-to-city route. On a flight I took recently, it showed 85% going one direction, and 77% going the other direction.

In addition, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics provides lists every month of ["chronically delayed" flights](#).

Pay with a credit card, not a debit card

If you buy your plane ticket with a credit card, you have far greater protection to dispute the charge under the federal [Fair Credit Billing Act](#).

Avoid checking a bag

This also isn't always possible. But having a carry-on reduces the chances of you getting separated from your bag.

Put a tracker in your bag

Today's technology allows you to buy a small GPS tracker that you can put anywhere — in a suitcase, a carry-on in case it gets checked at the gate, or, when you're at home, a set of keys or wallet. These generally connect to your smart phone to allow you to find your item anytime, anywhere.

Take a photo and document your property

If you are checking a bag, take a photo of your belongings in the suitcase in case you need to file a claim against the airline. You're entitled to reimbursement up to \$3,800 if your bag is lost. If you have expensive items, take photos of them and write down the model numbers, serial numbers, etc.

Also, while checked wheelchairs and scooters are considered baggage, they're not subject to the \$3,800 liability limit, [DOT says](#). Other "assistive devices" not subject to the \$3,800 limit include walkers, CPAP machines, hearing aids and prescription medications.

Consider travel insurance

It won't keep your flight from being canceled but should help with other expenses. (But read the terms and conditions on the limits.)

Check where your plane is

You can often get a heads-up on a problem, or reassurance that everything is on schedule, by checking the day before where your plane is coming from or where it is. Go to flightaware.com and search for the flight (don't forget the airline abbreviation.) Find your time and route and go to the link "Where is my plane now?" You'll see what city your plane is in currently and whether it's on time.

Remember to be nice

If you have an issue, you should always be nice to whoever you're dealing with. They probably didn't cause your problem, but they may be able to help you fix it.

Know you have rights

You have certain legal rights in case of cancellations, lost or damaged baggage or wheelchairs and involuntary bumping. [Here's a complete list](#). Airlines are also contractually obligated to honor its commitments to the DOT on various consumer protections. Go to flightright.gov.

[How to handle airline woes, from cancellations to refunds to lost bags](#)

I APPENDIX

The DOT has done a great job the last two years of pushing the major carriers to adopt new passenger-friendly policies, such as family seating so young children can sit next to an adult companion at no additional charge. Other policies deal with the airlines' commitments in cases of cancellations and delays under the airlines' control. The information below is as of Dec. 9, 2023.

The DOT's [flightrights.gov](https://www.flightrights.gov) dashboard clearly displays each airline's policy on various issues. Further, once the airlines have made a promise like this to the DOT, it becomes part of their contract and, while they can change their policy for the future, they can't go back on it for tickets purchased while that policy was in effect. The hope is the transparency pushes more airlines to adopt such practices.

Family Seating Dashboard

| Commitment for Fee-Free Family Seating | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|---------|-----------|----------|-------|----------|----------|---------|-----------|--------|--------|
| | Carrier | | | | | | | | | |
| | Alaska | Allegiant | American | Delta | Frontier | Hawaiian | JetBlue | Southwest | Spirit | United |
| Guarantees adjacent seats for child 13 or under and an accompanying adult at no additional cost for all fare types subject to limited conditions | ✓ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |

| Commitments for Controllable Cancellations | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|---------|-----------|----------|-------|----------|----------|---------|-----------|--------|--------|
| | Carrier | | | | | | | | | |
| | Alaska | Allegiant | American | Delta | Frontier | Hawaiian | JetBlue | Southwest | Spirit | United |
| Rebook passenger on same airline at no additional cost | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Rebook on partner airline or another airline with which it has an agreement at no additional cost | ✓ | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ |
| Meal or meal cash/voucher when cancellation results in passenger waiting for 3 hours or more for new flight | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Complimentary hotel accommodations for any passenger affected by an overnight cancellation | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Complimentary ground transportation to and from hotel for any passenger affected by an overnight cancellation | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Cash compensation when a cancellation results in passenger waiting for 3 hours or more from the scheduled departure time | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |
| Credit/travel voucher when cancellation results in passenger waiting for 3 hours or more from the scheduled departure time | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |
| Frequent flyer miles when cancellation results in passenger waiting for 3 hours or more from the scheduled departure time | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |

Commitments for Controllable Delays



| | Carrier | | | | | | | | | |
|--|----------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| | Alaska ^{CF} | Allegiant ^{CF} | American ^{CF} | Delta ^{CF} | Frontier ^{CF} | Hawaiian ^{CF} | JetBlue ^{CF} | Southwest ^{CF} | Spirit ^{CF} | United ^{CF} |
| Rebook passenger on same airline at no additional cost for significant delays | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Rebook on partner airline or another airline with which it has an agreement at no additional cost for significant delays | ✓ | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ |
| Meal or meal cash/voucher when flight delay results in passenger waiting 3 hours or more | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Complimentary hotel accommodations for any passenger affected by an overnight delay | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Complimentary ground transportation to and from hotel for any passenger affected by an overnight delay | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✗ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Cash compensation when a delay results in passenger waiting for 3 hours or more from the scheduled departure time | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |
| Credit/travel voucher when delay results in passenger waiting for 3 hours or more from the scheduled departure time | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |
| Frequent flyer miles when delay results in passenger waiting for 3 hours or more from the scheduled departure time | ✓ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ | ✗ |

I METHODOLOGY

For The Plane Truth 4, U.S. PIRG Education Fund analyzed Department of Transportation [Air Travel Consumer Reports](#) for the January through September of 2023 (which was released Dec. 1, 2023) and for 2022. Other data from DOT’s Bureau of Transportation Statistics from years past was also reviewed.

The reports, which often include 55 to nearly 80 pages worth of data, cover everything from performance of airlines, including cancellations, departure and arrival records and tarmac delays; on-time departures and arrivals at major airports nationwide; mishandled baggage and wheelchairs; and complaints about airlines and others that are part of the air travel experience.

This year, however, DOT has released complaints data only for January through May because it hasn’t been able to process complaints in a timely fashion. Complaint categories are flight problems, oversales, reservations/ticketing/boarding, fares, refunds, baggage, customer service, disability, advertising, discrimination, animals and other.

For this report, we analyzed data on cancellations, delays, on-time performance, bumping, mishandled baggage and mishandled wheelchairs. And we analyzed complaints data for January through May. Our references to past complaints come from our April report, The Plane Truth 2. That report consisted of an in-depth analysis of complaint data going back to 1997, the oldest year available online (through the lookback 1998 report.)

DOT generally looks at issues through three lenses:

- Top 10 airlines and their marketing partner airlines, currently 16.
- All U.S. operating airlines with revenue that represents at least 0.5 percent of all of the industry’s revenues. This year, there are 15 airlines in this group. Last year there were 17.
- All U.S. airlines, regardless of size.

In both of the first two categories, the top airlines represent about 95 percent of the domestic scheduled passenger air traffic.

For this report and all of our reports, we focus on the top 10 companies with their marketing partner airlines because many travelers don’t realize they’re flying on a small partner if they booked their flight through American, Delta, United or Alaska Airlines. We use DOT data for “operating airlines” only for complaints per 100,000 boarded passengers because DOT doesn’t report this data for the top 10 airlines with their marketing partners.

The top 10 airlines and their branded codeshare (marketing) partners this year include four airlines with partners:

Alaska Airlines: Horizon Air, SkyWest Airlines.

American Airlines: Air Wisconsin Airlines, Envoy Air, Piedmont Airlines, PSA Airlines, Republic Airways and SkyWest Airlines.

Delta Air Lines: Endeavor Air, Republic Airways, SkyWest Airlines.

United Airlines: Commutair, GoJet Airlines, Mesa Airlines, Republic Airways, SkyWest Airlines.