

House-Passed FAA Bill Leaves Existing Reagan National Airport Slot and Perimeter Rules Intact

July 27, 2023

On July 20, 2023, the House of Representatives passed Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) reauthorization legislation H.R. 3935, leaving in place the controversial flight limits (known as the slot and perimeter rules) at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (DCA). Whether or not to change these flight limits is likely to be debated again in the near future when the Senate works on reauthorizing FAA program funding and civil aviation laws.

Airlines flying to and from DCA are subject to slot and perimeter rules set by federal law and regulation ([49 U.S.C. §41718](#); [14 C.F.R. §93.123](#)). A slot is an Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) reservation required for each takeoff or landing. By controlling the frequency of takeoffs and landings, a slot system is typically put in place at airports with capacity constraint to ensure safety and optimize efficiency. Federal law and regulation set the total number of flights that can be handled in a given period of time at DCA. A round-trip flight serving DCA would require two slots, or a slot pair.

Flights to and from DCA are also restricted by a statutory “perimeter rule” that limits nonstop flights to a 1,250-mile distance unless they are granted an exemption by law. Flights of 1,250 miles or less are referred to as “within-perimeter.” Exempted flights are referred to as “beyond-perimeter.” The perimeter rule, which dates to the opening of Washington Dulles International Airport (IAD) in the early 1960s, was originally designed to move most long-distance airline traffic serving the Washington, DC, area to the new airport.

DCA is limited to a maximum of 67 hourly slots for flights both within- and beyond-perimeter. This maximum was established through a combination of federal regulations and statutes. Regulations at [14 C.F.R. §93.123](#) established 60 hourly slots at DCA, while statutes have granted an additional maximum of seven slots and have permitted slots to be used in different hours. The DCA slot rule has existed for over two decades, although the statutory limitations on the number of slots available have been modified over that period.

Prior to congressional action in 2000, all slots for flights arriving or departing DCA were required to operate within-perimeter. As part of FAA reauthorization legislation in 2000, 2003, and 2012, Congress

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IN12206

collectively granted 40 beyond-perimeter daily slots at DCA (20 round trips). According to a 2020 report by the Government Accountability Office ([GAO-21-176](#)), these 20 daily beyond-perimeter round trips are being operated between DCA and the following 10 cities:

- Austin, TX (1 round trip by Southwest Airlines)
- Denver, CO (4 round trips—3 by Frontier Airlines and 1 by United Airlines)
- Las Vegas, NV (1 round trip by American Airlines)
- Los Angeles, CA (4 round trips—1 by Alaska Airlines, 2 by American Airlines, and 1 by Delta Air Lines)
- Phoenix, AZ (3 round trips by American Airlines)
- Portland, OR (1 round trip by Alaska Airlines)
- Salt Lake City, UT (1 round trip by Delta Air Lines)
- San Francisco, CA (2 round trips—1 by Alaska Airlines and 1 by United Airlines)
- San Juan, PR (1 round trip by JetBlue Airways)
- Seattle, WA (2 round trips by Alaska Airlines)

During the FAA reauthorization debate in the 118th Congress, whether or not to allow additional DCA slots, including beyond-perimeter slots, has generated considerable interest from Members of Congress and aviation stakeholders. In May 2022, two similar bills, H.R. 3185 and S. 1933, were introduced in Congress. Both bills sought to add 56 new slots at DCA to allow 28 additional daily round-trip flights, without specifying how many could be for beyond-perimeter flights. This proposed increase generated support as well as opposition from various stakeholders. The proposal was subsequently reduced to 14 new slots (seven new daily round-trip flights) as an amendment to the House FAA reauthorization bill. This amendment, however, was not agreed to in legislation that passed the House on July 20, leaving intact the existing slot and perimeter system.

Washington, DC, metropolitan area local governments and residents living near DCA or under its flight paths have generally opposed an increase in flights. Although opposition focuses primarily on the flight delays and noise impacts of additional traffic and congestion, many also have expressed concerns over the potential reduction of flights serving regional airports and smaller markets within-perimeter. This is because airlines would likely use new beyond-perimeter slot exemptions for nonstop flights to big cities outside the 1,250-mile radius.

Delta Air Lines and other members of [the Capital Access Alliance](#) group support the expansion, advocating that improving passenger access to the nation's capital will increase the affordability and efficiency of air travel and bring economic growth. United Airlines, which has a large operation at nearby IAD, opposes the changes as part of [the Coalition to Protect America's Regional Airports](#).

The Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority ([MWAA](#)), which operates both DCA and IAD, advocates to preserve the DCA slot and perimeter rules. MWAA maintains that the DC region is well served by the bigger IAD, which is located about 30 miles west of the District of Columbia in northern Virginia and has no flight restrictions. The [MWAA 2022 annual comprehensive financial report](#) shows that DCA had about 24 million passengers in 2022, approximately 3 million more than the 21 million passengers going through IAD.

Author Information

Rachel Y. Tang
Analyst in Transportation and Industry

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