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EVERGREEN, Colo. (AP) -- It happens every day: Passengers do a slow burn as their planes idle on taxiways, waiting for permission to take off.

That unpleasant scenario has become increasingly common as the Federal Aviation Administration tries to cope with an overburdened air traffic system. Just this week, the FAA is expanding a test program that gives airlines more leeway in plotting their own flight routes.

But two industry consultants, based in the Denver area, say the program falls short of what is needed and have proposed an alternative: Free Flight. Let airlines fly when and where they want, period.

"The airlines have no tactical control of their planes," said Mike Baiada, a pilot for United Airlines and a private consultant. "They sell the tickets, load the food, crew and baggage, put the passengers on board and then turn control of the flight over to the federal government."

Baiada and Michael Boyd, who is president of Aviation Systems Research Corp., an airport consulting firm, say national air traffic routes often take planes far out of their way.

The roundabout routes waste fuel, airline capacity and time, costing the airlines -- and passengers -- about \$5 billion annually, they say.

Baiada heads RMB Associates, a firm founded in 1981 to help airlines identify operational weaknesses. Boyd's firm provides forecasts and trend analyses for the airline industry.

Boyd and Baiada say the current system is so inefficient that a commuter flight from Islip, N.Y., to Newark, N.J. -- only 76 miles away -- averages just 56 miles per hour in the air because of the indirect route chosen by the FAA due to heavy local air traffic.

"You could probably get there faster on the Long Island Expressway," Baiada said.

A flight from Nashville, Tenn., to Boston is 943 miles direct, but FAA flight rules require the plane to fly east over Raleigh, N.C., before flying north along East Coast air corridors, adding more than 170 miles to the flight.

Every day there are an average of 5,200 planes in the sky during peak periods, dropping to under 1,000 at night.

Under the system envisioned by Baiada and Boyd -- and presented to Congress last summer -- air traffic controllers would no longer be controllers, but conflict managers. Computers would tell pilots and traffic managers of a potential collision, and flight plans would be changed.

Lane Speck, director of air traffic rules and procedures for the FAA, says free flight is a good idea, but believes it is premature.

Speck said the FAA has allowed planes in limited tests to "go direct" on parts of their flight plans when they fall behind or there is no potential conflict with other flights.

But, he said, the main reason the FAA is moving slowly on full implementation is safety. "Safety is the first factor we apply to any kind of change. Free flight would be very tough to accommodate," he said.

Bob Flocke, a spokesman for the Air Line Pilots Association in Washington, said pilots have to be assured free flight is safe before they will support it.

So far, he said, the idea is so new the government and the airline industry have been unable to even agree on a definition of free flight. They must come to terms over that before they can determine whether the program is viable in terms of safety, he said.

"We take a conservative approach when it comes to safety," Flocke said. "This has tremendous implications for the safety of the system. A lot of research still has to be done before we can support it. Aviation safety should not be trial and error."

But with the nation's airlines still having a tough time turning profits and the prospect of huge savings that free flight offers, the nation's air carriers are enthusiastic about the idea.

Jack Ryan, vice president of air traffic management for the Air Transport Association of America, said the airline trade association has advocated free flight for years.

In a step toward giving pilots more freedom to choose their own routes, the FAA this week is expanding its "user preferred trajectory" program.

The program, which will allow about 3,300 flights a day to choose their own routes to improve fuel consumption or flight times, is being expanded to flights at 39,000 feet or higher. The program will be further expanded Feb. 1 to flights at 37,000 feet.

"It's the beginning," said the FAA's Speck. "It's not free flight, but it has all the earmarks."

The program, however, will not apply within 200 miles of departure or destination points, areas where Baiada says airlines can save the most money.

And Boyd says if the current system is not changed, air traffic growth will slow, air transportation will become less available to consumers and the economies of small cities will be hurt.