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Opinion: Airline Delays—Both A Limitation And Opportunity

R. MICHAEL BAIADA

FAA proposes implementing a new artificial intelligence (AI)-powered tool as a core piece of its sweeping air traffic control (ATC) modernization effort. Despite the glowing projections, industry should remain skeptical if the agency continues to drive aircraft trajectory decisions instead of the airlines/owners.

An FAA fact sheet says the Strategic Management of Airspace, Routes, and Trajectories (SMART) system will leverage AI and analyze “airline schedules, weather, airport capacity, airspace conditions, and operational constraints” in-real-time. This will “identify potential conflicts before they occur,” it adds.

But while FAA's SMART fact sheet sounds good, it does not address the data accuracy issue and leaves ATC in charge of efficiency. ATC's job is safety and separation, not efficiency.

Air Space Intelligence, Inc. was awarded a 12-year, \$875 million contract that includes SMART deployment. Initial operations are slated to begin this fall—as in weeks from now.

SMART's primary purpose is to help ATC reduce airline delays. But airline delays are just that: airline delays—something ATC can't fix at their root.

SMART's underlying premise is that a centrally managed, ATC-centric, pre-planned aircraft trajectory controlled by FAA can solve a delay problem that is mostly created in real time—day-of—unmanaged arrival queues. Rather than unclogging the skies, FAA's approach is likely to suboptimize airline efficiency, profitability and competition.

It doesn't have to be this way. As independently validated by FAA, GE Aviation and others, each airline is in a position to efficiently mitigate its delays by inserting bespoke day-of operational business needs into internally managed arrival queues at capacity-challenged airports.

SMART misses the mark in several ways.

Airports are not full and ATC does not cause delays and congestion. These assumptions reflect an outdated analysis that is primed for updating.

Airport/airspace capacity does not drive most airspace inefficiencies, yet this is the problem SMART is trying to solve. Airline delays stem from intermittent airport point overloads created by highly variant, unmanaged arrival queues, forcing ATC to inefficiently linearize the flow near the airport.

FAA defines flight efficiency as less fuel and shorter routes; however, there are many other factors involved in an efficient and profitable outcome for each aircraft.

SMART does not consider schedule, connections, gate availability, crew legality, fuel, capacity, ramp, maintenance and numerous other operational issues. Ignoring such day-of business factors ensures a sub-optimized solution.

SMART will reduce competition by managing all aircraft toward a common, system-wide, less-than-optimum, first come, first served result, limiting an individual airline's ability to achieve day-of operational excellence, thus bringing the whole airline industry to the lowest common denominator.

Data accuracy, including weather, winds, temperature, and aircraft position, is only actionable day-of, yet FAA proposes adjusting airline schedules days or weeks in advance based on the outdated perspective that airline schedules drive delays.

ATC's plan is to assign each aircraft a strict, time-based, four-dimensional, conflict-free trajectory. This may help ATC manage traffic near the airport but has little to

no value to airlines.

Airlines can speed and slow down aircraft to manage the arrival queue, but ATC's only option is delay.

As presented, SMART lacks the rich, internal airline day-of business data necessary to meet the airline's goals. SMART also ignores the pilot's ability to manage their enroute speed to achieve the airline's more efficient arrival queue.

Airlines, not ATC, can internally manage their aircraft to build an efficient arrival queue that results in less ATC intervention near the airport.

SMART permits airlines/users to file their preferred flight plans. What this means is yet to be determined but if this is like FAA's Collaborative Decision-Making program, FAA adjusts the airline's preferences based on FAA's perspective, not the airline's business needs.

SMART's goal is to manage arrival queues farther from landing by building conflict-free trajectories and setting hard times at waypoints along each aircraft's flight path. This depends on the accuracy of the forecast winds and would add a waypoint timing task to the controller's workload.

Even if SMART bypasses the controller and manages enroute waypoint timing with electronic messages to pilots, this

ATC-centric control will significantly limit an airline's critical day-of operational flexibility.

For an airline, which aircraft lands in what order is critical to profitability. The second and third order negative impacts of not addressing these internal, real time, "day of" business issues in the arrival queue affects schedules to gate availability, crew legalities, airport throughput, and more.

The narrow view of FAA's SMART tool, and similar ATC centric programs, will produce limited positive outcomes and will likely make our airspace/airports less efficient. Some delays will undoubtedly shift into the enroute airspace, saving fuel, but the negative impact of the underlying first come, first served, non-business-oriented arrival-queue inefficiencies and delays will remain unresolved.

One of aviation's enduring challenges is that aircraft arrival queues are both a limitation and—for those that mitigate their ramifications by managing or avoiding them—an opportunity. Only individual airlines and their data-rich internal controls can efficiently thread this needle.

—R. Michael Baiada is president of air traffic management specialist ATH Group, developer of the GreenLandings aircraft flow and arrival time management software. ■