U.S. air travel could take days to recover after FAA's lifting of rare nationwide ground stop

Homeland Security Secretary Markwayne Mullin says 'zero evidence' of cyberattack, while high jet-fuel costs mean fewer flights available to travelers seeking to rebook

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The agency issued the ground stop a little before 4 p.m. Eastern, with relief coming some four and a half hours later. The FAA had cited a “communication issue” impacting air-traffic-control centers and “extraordinary circumstances.”

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy that his agency was trying to move “as many flights as we can tonight” and the work would continue Saturday. Homeland Security Secretary Markwayne Mullin said that there was “zero evidence” that the issue was caused by a cyberattack.



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For the thousands of air travelers with disrupted plans, rebooking trips could prove to be tricky — U.S. airlines operate on tight schedules and have cut flights in recent months in response to rising jet-fuel costs. That means people affected by Friday's outages may have fewer options once systems are fully back up, which could extend the headaches for travelers for days.

More than 9,000 flights within, into and out of the U.S. have been delayed on Friday, with cancelations climbing by late Friday, according to FlightAware. U.S. flight cancellations had surpassed 5,500 flights as of 8 p.m. Eastern.

According to the aviation analytics firm Cirium, there were 26,284 flights scheduled to depart Friday from the U.S., including about 11,000 slated to take off after 4 p.m. Eastern, around the time that the ground stop was issued.



Passengers wait Friday on a plane at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport. Photo: AFP/Getty Images

Cirium estimated that more than 1.5 million passengers were scheduled to fly in the U.S. on Friday from 4 p.m. Eastern onward.

The most affected airports included Chicago's O'Hare, Atlanta's Hartfield-Jackson and Dallas–Fort Worth, FlightAware said late Friday.

The Wall Street Journal, citing people described as having been briefed on the matter, reported that the problems appeared to affect a telecommunications network used by air-traffic controllers to communicate with pilots and overseen by L3Harris Technologies . The aerospace and defense company did not immediately return a MarketWatch request for comment.

Derek Cann, a flight expert at the travel site Going, said he expected knock-on delays to extend into Saturday and potentially Sunday as airlines work to realign their planes and crews and reset their schedules.

Concerns about outdated systems have been swirling in aviation for decades. "This has been in the making for the last 20 years, in terms of air-traffic-control modernization," said Ernie Arvai, president of AirInsight Group.

"We have talked about it forever and not done much about it," he said. "I feel bad for all the people today who are going to be stuck."

In a White House press conference late Friday, Duffy and Mullin called for some $50 billion in funding from Congress — up, apparently, from a previously requested $30 billion — to upgrade FAA technology. Mullin suggested "a complete overhaul of the system" was needed.

President Donald Trump, speaking by telephone to Fox News, indicated he was able to dismiss the possibility of a cyberattack at least in part because "there's nobody taking credit," according to the Fox News correspondent Peter Doocy, and instead, Doocy reported, pointed a finger at "a bunch of old broken stuff."

Richard Clarke, who beginning in 1998 served as the U.S. government's first national coordinator for security, infrastructure protection and counterterrorism, said in a CNN interview on Saturday that it was too soon to rule out a cyberattack and that doing so absent a full investigation would undermine the confidence of the traveling public.

Rep. Suhas Subramanyam, a Virginia Democrat who serves on the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, suggested during an MS NOW interview early Saturday that the incoming House majority in January would include FAA operations under the Trump administration among its oversight priorities.

One of the people stranded on Friday was Nick Renteria, a Los Angeles resident stranded at the airport in Dallas–Fort Worth on his way to Arkansas. There was barely any room to sit at the airport, Renteria said. "I'm on the floor eating my pretzel," he said.

Samone Doyle heard the news about the ground stop half an hour before she was to embark on a Delta Air Lines flight from Houston to Detroit.

Flight attendants seemed confused to her and "had no idea what to do or how things would go," Doyle said. Airport management asked everyone to remain close to their gates, she added.

Doyle said she rebooked her flight for Sunday and was able to return to her boyfriend's home in Houston. Many others, however, were at the gate with "no idea what to do because they don't live there and no one had any answers," she said.

Jared Jones was on a United Airlines flight from the Dominican Republic to Chicago when he saw the news on his phone. Neither the pilots nor flight attendants had made an announcement about the ground stop as of 5:30 p.m., and Jones only knew about the stop because he had bought SpaceX's Starlink wifi service.

Noah Nordengren was stuck at the International Falls, Minn., airport late Friday on his way to the Minneapolis–St. Paul airport. Nordengren said the airport bought pizza for passengers, which he watched pass through the X-ray machine. Fellow passengers have eyes "glued to their phones to figure what's going to go next," he said.


Travelers wait in Terminal B at the Orlando, Fla., airport during the ground stop. Photo: Getty Images

As news of the ground stop reverberated, several airline stocks traded lower in the after-hours session, extending losses during the regular session. The U.S. Global Jets ETF traded 1.6% lower after closing down 0.7% on Friday.

Shares of rental-car companies Avis Budget and Hertz Global rose 1.4% and 8.3%, respectively, in the after hours, after ending the regular trading day lower. People who called Amtrak's main reservation number reported hearing a recording about a high volume of calls.

The last time there was a nationwide ground stop was in January 2023, after the failure of a pilot-alert system. That lasted about 90 minutes. Before that, the only such nationwide stop was after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

"We are watching aviation history," said Katy Nastro, aviation and travel correspondent for the flight-tracker app Flighty.

Passengers are entitled to a cash refund under Department of Transportation rules if a flight was canceled; if it departed to or arrived from a different airport; or if it was by delayed more than three hours for domestic flights, or six hours for international flights.

Cann, from the travel site Going, said people hoping to rebook their flights should look for the earliest flights on an airline's daily schedule and nonstop flights to avoid cascading delays.

Genna Contino, Andrew Keshner, Robert Schroeder and Venessa Wong contributed.