



STORMY WEATHER FOR U.S. AIRLINE INDUSTRY

BY MALCOLM BURSON AND JANICE MOLLOY

“Under ideal conditions, the system operates effectively but under adverse weather it can’t adjust to the demands.”

—“Dealing with Air Delays,” CNNfn.com, August 21, 2000.

Did you travel by air in the United States this past summer? If so, were you one of the hundreds of thousands of vacationers and business travelers to be delayed or stranded by “weather”?

Up, Up, and Away

Air travel has boomed along with the economy. The number of U.S. passengers rose to 635 million last year, compared with 278 million in 1978.

But U.S. airport capacity hasn’t expanded to meet the surge in demand. To compound the problem, many airlines use a hub-and-spoke system to reduce costs and increase efficiency.

Air traffic control systems are similarly outdated. According to CNNfn.com, “[T]he system has kept to an antiquated design. Frequently described as ‘highways in the sky,’ it has a finite number of routes. . . .”

has updated computers and screens. But this new equipment does not fundamentally change the way traffic is directed—or the fact that more planes are flying than ever before.

Calm Before the Storm?

These problems reflect a classic “Tragedy of the Commons” scenario, paired with severe constraints on growth. Each individual player—in this case, each airline—relies on a common set of resources, without concern for the collective impact of everyone’s actions (R1 and R2 in “Stormy Weather”).

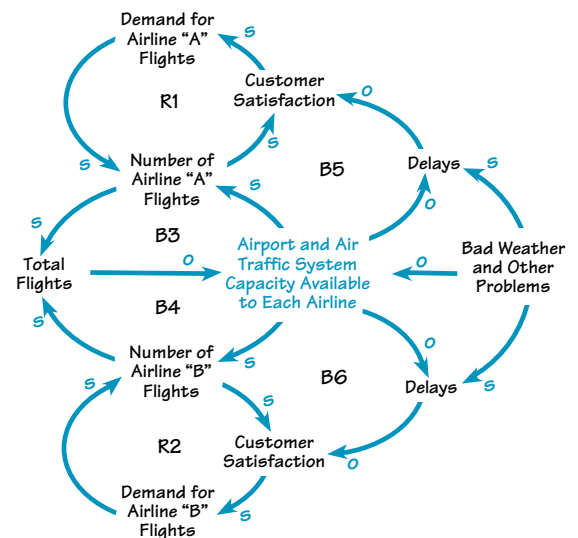
So it is with the U.S. airline industry. Each carrier’s effort to service more passengers undermines the ability of airports and air traffic controllers to keep up with demand, especially when weather problems strike.

The truth is there’s probably little the airlines can do themselves to tackle the problem; effective

solutions for a “Tragedy of the Commons” dynamic never lie at the individual level. And industry leaders have shown no desire to return to the days of regulation, which might offer a way to ensure equal access to limited resources. Instead, the airlines and government must find other approaches to balancing individual and collective needs, and short- and long-term challenges and goals.

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STORMY WEATHER



Each airline relies on a common set of resources, without concern for the collective impact of everyone’s actions (R1 and R2). At a certain point, the resource becomes overloaded, and all parties involved experience diminished benefits (B3, B4, B5, and B6).