

The Biden administration says it's in talks with airlines to prevent disruptions over 5G rollout

Posted on January 18, 2022 by Business Editor



The White House said it working with airlines, wireless providers and federal agencies on a solution to a dispute over the rollout of 5G service, scheduled to begin Wednesday, that airlines say may interfere with navigation systems and could force them to cancel flights.

“The administration is actively engaged with the FAA, FCC, wireless carriers, airlines, and aviation equipment manufacturers to reach a solution that maximizes 5G deployment while protecting air safety and minimizing disruptions to passenger travel, cargo operations, and our economic recovery,” said a White House official.

Aviation industry executives have for weeks warned about potential flight disruptions stemming from the new service and repeatedly urged the White House to step in. Some flight cancellations could be announced as early as Tuesday, people familiar with the airlines’ plans said. Most recently, on Monday, CEOs from passenger and cargo carriers wrote to Biden administration officials urging them to block the rollout of the service within 2 miles of airport runways.

The Federal Aviation Administration had warned that the fifth generation C-band service could interfere with certain airline equipment like radio altimeters, which are used for low-visibility landings. The spectrum, which AT&T and Verizon would use, sits next to the frequency band, used by aircraft.

It was not immediately clear if a potential agreement would prevent flight disruptions. The FAA over the weekend cleared 45% of the country’s commercial fleet to fly after 5G is deployed.

In a letter to the White House and heads of the FAA, FCC and Transportation Department, airline CEOs on Monday said that modern aircraft use radio altimeters for a variety of safety systems and that those planes “will be deemed unusable” and could be grounded.

“In addition to the chaos caused domestically, this lack of usable widebody aircraft could potentially strand tens of thousands of Americans overseas,” said the letter, which was signed by CEOs of Delta, United, Southwest, American and the heads of the aviation arms of UPS and FedEx.

United said 15,000 flights a year could be affected and warned about delays at major hubs like Houston, Newark, New Jersey and Chicago.

“We implore the Biden administration to act quickly and apply the same common sense solutions here that have clearly worked so well around the world,” United said late Monday.

“It’s unclear if any agreement can be reached to modify the 5G rollout, so we must prepare for the worst,” JetBlue Airways CEO Robin Hayes wrote to staff on Monday.

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