

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY WASHINGTON, D.C.

Issued by the Department of Transportation on the 28th day of August 2023

American Airlines, Inc.

Violations of 14 CFR Part 259 and 49 U.S.C. §§ 41712 and 42301

Docket DOT-OST-2023-0001

Served August 28, 2023

CONSENT ORDER

This consent order concerns violations by American Airlines, Inc., (American) of 14 CFR Part 259 (the Department's Tarmac Delay Rule), 49 U.S.C. § 41712 (prohibition against unfair and deceptive practices), and 49 U.S.C. § 42301 (requirement to adhere to a carrier's tarmac delay contingency plan). American failed to adhere to the assurances in its contingency plan for lengthy tarmac delays for 43 domestic flights at various airports throughout the United States. Specifically, the carrier permitted these 43 flights to remain on the tarmac for more than three hours without providing the passengers on those flights an opportunity to deplane. The carrier also failed to have sufficient resources to implement its contingency plan for lengthy tarmac delays. This order directs American to cease and desist from future similar violations of 14 CFR Part 259 and 49 U.S.C. §§ 41712 and 42301 and assesses American \$4.1 million in civil penalties.

Applicable Law

Pursuant to 49 U.S.C. § 42301(b) and (e), each covered U.S. carrier is required to develop a tarmac delay contingency plan for each U.S. airport it serves and to adhere to its respective plans. In addition, pursuant to 14 CFR 259.4 (Tarmac Delay Rule), covered carriers that operate scheduled passenger service using any aircraft with a design capacity of 30 or more passenger seats are required to adopt, implement, and adhere to contingency plans for lengthy tarmac delays at each large hub, medium hub, small hub, and non-hub U.S. airport at which they operate or market air service.

¹ 14 CFR 259.4 was amended by a Final Rule issued on May 3, 2021, which became effective on June 2, 2021. 86 Fed. Reg. 23260 (May 3, 2021).

Tarmac Delay Rule Effective Prior to June 2, 2021

Thirty-one of the tarmac delay violations covered by this order occurred prior to June 2, 2021, the effective date of the final rule modifying U.S. and foreign air carrier obligations with respect to tarmac delays and conforming carrier obligations with respect to departure delays with the changes made to the FAA Extension, Safety, and Security Act of 2016 (2016 FAA Extension Act).

Under the pre-June 2021 tarmac delay rule, covered U.S. carriers were required to provide assurances in their contingency plans that they would not permit an aircraft to remain on the tarmac for more than three hours for domestic flights and four hours for international flights without providing passengers an opportunity to deplane, with the following exceptions: (1) where the pilot-in-command determines that an aircraft cannot leave its position on the tarmac to deplane passengers due to a safety-related or security-related reason (e.g., weather, a directive from an appropriate government agency, etc.); or (2) where Air Traffic Control (ATC) advises the pilot-in-command that returning to the gate or another disembarkation point elsewhere in order to deplane passengers would significantly disrupt airport operations.²

For all covered flights delayed on the tarmac, carriers were required to provide adequate food and water no later than two hours after the aircraft leaves the gate (in the case of a departure) or touches down (in the case of an arrival) unless the pilot-in-command determined that safety or security requirements precluded such service.³ Further, carriers were required to ensure that they had sufficient resources to carry out their contingency plans.⁴

The 2016 FAA Extension Act, which became law on July 15, 2016, required the Department to issue regulations and take other actions to change the standard for when tarmac delay violations occur in the case of departure delays for U.S. carriers. On November 22, 2016, the Department's Office of Aviation Consumer Protection (OACP)⁵ issued an interim enforcement policy to implement the statutory changes to the Tarmac Delay Rule pending rulemaking.⁶ The enforcement policy also states that a departing flight is considered to have begun the process of returning to a suitable disembarkation point when permission to do so is granted by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) control tower, airport authority, or other relevant authority directing the aircraft's operations while it is on the tarmac. If the aircraft is in an area of the airport property that is under the carrier's control, a departing flight is considered to have begun the process of returning to a suitable disembarkation point when the pilot begins maneuvering the aircraft to the disembarkation point.

² 14 CFR 259.4(b)(1) and (2).

³ 14 CFR 259.4(b)(3).

⁴ 14 CFR 259.4(b)(7).

⁵ The office was formerly known as the Office of Aviation Enforcement and Proceedings.

⁶ See Enforcement Policy on Extended Tarmac Delays (Nov. 22, 2016), available at, https://www.transportation.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/docs/Enforcement%20Policy%20on%20Extended%20Tarmac%20Delays.pdf.

Tarmac Delay Rule Effective On and After June 2, 2021

Twelve of the tarmac delay violations covered by this order occurred on or after June 2, 2021, the effective date of the final rule modifying carriers' obligations with respect to tarmac delays, including carriers' obligations with respect to departure delays to conform with the changes made to the 2016 FAA Extension Act.

Pursuant to the amended rule, for domestic and international flights, covered U.S. carriers are required to provide a passenger on a flight experiencing a tarmac delay the opportunity to deplane before the tarmac delay exceeds three hours for domestic flights and four hours for international flights, with the following exceptions: (1) for departing flights, the flight begins to return to a suitable disembarkation point no later than three hours (for domestic flights) or four hours (for international flights) after the main aircraft door is closed in order to deplane passengers⁷; (2) the pilot-in-command determines that deplaning passengers at a suitable disembarkation point would jeopardize passenger safety or security, or there is a safety-related or security-related reason why the aircraft cannot leave its position on the tarmac to deplane passengers (e.g., weather, a directive from an appropriate government agency, etc.); or (3) ATC advises the pilot-in-command that returning to the gate or another disembarkation point in order to deplane passengers would significantly disrupt airport operations.⁸

The amended rule also requires that for all covered flights delayed on the tarmac, carriers must provide adequate food and potable water no later than two hours after the start of the tarmac delay, unless the pilot-in-command determines that safety or security considerations preclude such service. Further, consistent with the requirements of the prior rule, carriers must ensure that they have sufficient resources to implement their contingency plans. ¹⁰

Unfair and Deceptive Practice and Civil Penalty Statute

A U.S. air carrier's failure to comply with assurances required by 49 U.S.C. § 42301 or 14 CFR 259.4 and as contained in its contingency plan for lengthy tarmac delays constitutes an unfair and deceptive practice within the meaning of 49 U.S.C. § 41712. Pursuant to 49 U.S.C. § 46301, violations of 14 CFR Part 259 or 49 U.S.C. §§ 41712 and 42301 subject a carrier to civil penalties. Because the purpose of section 259.4 is to protect individual passengers from being

⁷ 14 CFR 259.4(c)(3)(i) codifies the departure delay exception set forth in 49 U.S.C. § 42301, clarifies that a departure delay begins when the main aircraft door is closed, and incorporates language for determining when a return to a suitable disembarkation point begins based on where the aircraft is located and who is in control of such area.

⁸ 14 CFR 259.4(c)(1), (2), and (3).

⁹ 14 CFR 259.4(c)(4). To note, the amended rule requires carriers to provide adequate food and potable water no later than 2 hours after "the start of the tarmac delay," rather than no later than 2 hours after "the aircraft leaves the gate (in the case of a departure) or touches down (in the case of an arrival)." This change to the requirements was made to standardize carrier obligations such that the food and water timer would begin at the same time a tarmac delay begins under the amended rule.

¹⁰ 14 CFR 259.4(c)(8).

¹¹ The maximum civil penalty for violations of the aviation economic regulations and statutes occurring from January 1, 2018 to November 28, 2018 is \$32,140 per violation. The maximum civil penalty for violations of the aviation

forced to remain on an aircraft for more than three hours for domestic flights or four hours for international flights without the opportunity to deplane, OACP takes the position that a separate violation occurs for each passenger who is forced to remain on board an aircraft for longer than the set amount of time without the opportunity to deplane.

Facts and Conclusions

American is an air carrier as defined by 49 U.S.C. § 40102(a)(2)¹² that operates scheduled service at large hub, medium hub, small hub, and non-hub airports throughout the United States using at least one aircraft having a design seating capacity of more than 30 passenger seats. For each tarmac delay violation covered under this order, American had contingency plans for lengthy tarmac delays containing assurances that were consistent with the version of the Tarmac Delay Rule that was in effect at the time of the delay.

OACP conducted an extensive investigation and determined that American failed to adhere to the assurances in its tarmac delay contingency plan for 43 flights between 2018 and 2021, which affected a total of 5,821 passengers. Most of the delays occurred at Dallas Fort Worth International Airport (DFW), a major hub for American. Details about each of these flights, and related circumstances and events, are provided below.

December 26 and 27, 2018 — Dallas Fort Worth International Airport

On December 26, 2018, and continuing into the following morning, operations at DFW were impacted by severe thunderstorms for several hours, which included intermittent ramp closures and lingering congestion at the airport. American was unable to efficiently clear aircraft from its gates or find other remote deplaning options for its aircraft after the storms, which led to several inbound American flights experiencing lengthy tarmac delays after the storms. American violated the Tarmac Delay Rule ¹³ when it failed to provide passengers on board 10 flights with the opportunity to deplane before the passengers on those flights experienced tarmac delays exceeding three hours as listed below.

economic regulations and statutes occurring from November 29, 2018 to July 31, 2019 is \$33,333 per violation. The maximum civil penalty applicable to violations occurring from July 31, 2019 to January 10, 2021 is \$34,147; the maximum penalty applicable to violations occurring from January 11, 2021 to May 2, 2021 is \$34,777; the maximum civil penalty for violations from May 3, 2021 to March 20, 2022 is \$35,188; and the maximum civil penalty for violations from March 21, 2022 to January 5, 2023 is \$37,377. Revisions to Civil Penalty Amounts, 83 Fed. Reg. 60732 (November 27, 2018); 84 Fed. Reg. 37059 (July 31, 2019); 86 Fed. Reg. 1745 (January 11, 2021); 86 Fed. Reg. 23241 (May 3, 2021); and 87 Fed. Reg. 15839 (March 21, 2022).

¹² Under 49 U.S.C. § 40102(a)(2), an "air carrier" means a citizen of the United States undertaking by any means, directly or indirectly, to provide air transportation.

¹³ Because these violations occurred in December 2018, prior to the issuance of the Department's amended Tarmac Delay Rule, American violated 14 CFR 259.4(b)(1), the version of the rule effective prior to June 2, 2021. As discussed above, 14 CFR 259.4(b)(1) has since been replaced by 14 CFR 259.4(c)(1).

Flight Number	Duration of the Delay	Number of Passengers
AA30	3 hours and 48 minutes	113 passengers
AA242	4 hours and 19 minutes	75 passengers
AA249	4 hours and 28 minutes	77 passengers
AA654	3 hours and 12 minutes	93 passengers
AA797	4 hours and 9 minutes	183 passengers
AA1185	3 hours and 26 minutes	73 passengers
AA2430	3 hours and 59 minutes	120 passengers
AA2439	3 hours and 13 minutes	107 passengers
AA2738	3 hours and 17 minutes	181 passengers
AA2784	3 hours and 46 minutes	111 passengers

January 13, 2019 — Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport

On January 13, 2019, flight 4639, a domestic flight, experienced a lengthy tarmac delay of 4 hours and 42 minutes after the flight landed at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (DCA). Operations at DCA were impacted by Winter Storm Gia, which brought several inches of snowfall to the area. Upon landing, the carrier was not able to secure an open gate for this flight for some time. Once the aircraft eventually made its way to its assigned gate, the jet bridge, which was controlled by American, malfunctioned, and the aircraft had to be towed to a new gate for deplaning. American violated the Tarmac Delay Rule¹⁴ when it failed to provide 71 passengers on board flight 4639 with the opportunity to deplane before the tarmac delay exceeded three hours.

June 9, 2019 — Dallas Fort Worth International Airport

On June 9, 2019, operations at DFW were impacted by severe thunderstorms for several hours; impacts included intermittent ramp closures and multiple ground stops. Once ground stops were lifted, a high volume of traffic, including many American flights, converged at DFW in a short period of time. American encountered significant issues including difficulties with clearing its gates for inbound aircraft and managing its flight crews, and several inbound American flights experienced lengthy tarmac delays after the storms. American violated the Tarmac Delay Rule¹⁵ when it failed to provide passengers on board 14 flights with the opportunity to deplane before the passengers on those flights experienced tarmac delays exceeding three hours as listed below.

Flight Number	Duration of the Delay	Number of Passengers
AA706	3 hours and 23 minutes	171 passengers
AA1208	3 hours and 19 minutes	170 passengers
AA1222	3 hours and 20 minutes	138 passengers
AA1599	3 hours and 34 minutes	149 passengers

¹⁴ Because this violation occurred in January 2019, prior to the issuance of the Department's amended Tarmac Delay Rule, American violated 14 CFR 259.4(b)(1), the version of the rule effective prior to June 2, 2021. As discussed above, 14 CFR 259.4(b)(1) has since been replaced by 14 CFR 259.4(c)(1).

¹⁵ Because these violations occurred in June 2019, prior to the issuance of the Department's amended Tarmac Delay Rule, American violated 14 CFR 259.4(b)(1), the version of the rule effective prior to June 2, 2021. As discussed above, 14 CFR 259.4(b)(1) has since been replaced by 14 CFR 259.4(c)(1).

AA1612	3 hours and 31 minutes	142 passengers
AA1816	3 hours and 18 minutes	183 passengers
AA2248	3 hours and 16 minutes	187 passengers
AA2308	3 hours and 47 minutes	172 passengers
AA2314	3 hours and 12 minutes	180 passengers
AA2357	3 hours and 58 minutes	155 passengers
AA2536	3 hours and 33 minutes	127 passengers
AA2550	3 hours and 44 minutes	149 passengers
AA2755	3 hours and 15 minutes	189 passengers
AA2825	3 hours and 22 minutes	145 passengers

August 16, 2020 — San Antonio International Airport

On August 16, 2020, operations at DFW were impacted by severe thunderstorms. American diverted 14 flights that were destined for DFW to San Antonio International Airport (SAT). American lacked sufficient resources to appropriately handle several of these flights once they landed at SAT, and several diverted American flights experienced lengthy tarmac delays there. American violated the Tarmac Delay Rule¹⁶ when it failed to provide passengers on board six flights with the opportunity to deplane before the passengers on those flights experienced tarmac delays exceeding three hours as listed below.

Flight Number	Duration of the Delay	Number of Passengers
AA244	3 hours and 17 minutes	153 passengers
AA1401	4 hours and 57 minutes	161 passengers
AA1599	5 hours and 13 minutes	68 passengers
AA2308	6 hours and 3 minutes	105 passengers
AA2344	4 hours and 32 minutes	139 passengers
AA2708	4 hours and 20 minutes	113 passengers

In addition, OACP's investigation revealed that American failed to provide a food and water service to passengers on board flight 1599 prior to the two-hour mark of the tarmac delay. ¹⁷

August 1, 2021 — Dallas Fort Worth International Airport

On August 1, 2021, operations at DFW were impacted by severe thunderstorms. Though OACP recognizes that the conditions were challenging, American was unable to effectively manage its gates and lacked sufficient resources to appropriately handle all inbound flights. As a result, passengers on several inbound American flights experienced lengthy tarmac delays. American violated the Tarmac Delay Rule when it failed to provide passengers on board five flights with the

¹⁶ Because these violations occurred in August 2020, prior to the issuance of the Department's amended Tarmac Delay Rule, American violated 14 CFR 259.4(b)(1), the version of the rule effective prior to June 2, 2021. As discussed above, 14 CFR 259.4(b)(1) has since been replaced by 14 CFR 259.4(c)(1).

¹⁷ Because this violation occurred in August 2020, prior to the issuance of the Department's amended Tarmac Delay Rule, American violated 14 CFR 259.4(b)(3), the version of the rule effective prior to June 2, 2021. As discussed above, 14 CFR 259.4(b)(3) has since been replaced by 14 CFR 259.4(c)(4).

opportunity to deplane before the passengers on those flights experienced tarmac delays exceeding three hours as listed below.

Flight Number	Duration of the Delay	Number of Passengers
AA541	3 hours and 21 minutes	190 passengers
AA766	3 hours and 16 minutes	120 passengers
AA1146	3 hours and 12 minutes	186 passengers
AA1736	3 hours and 17 minutes	111 passengers
AA2393	4 hours and 6 minutes	149 passengers

August 17, 2021 — George Bush Intercontinental Airport

On August 17, 2021, operations at DFW were impacted by severe thunderstorms, resulting in American being forced to divert 74 flights that were destined for DFW to alternate airports, including George Bush Intercontinental Airport (IAH). Operations at IAH were also impacted by thunderstorms. Though OACP recognizes that the conditions were challenging, American was unable to effectively manage its gates and lacked sufficient resources to appropriately handle the volume of flights at IAH. Passengers on several American flights experienced lengthy tarmac delays at IAH as a result. American violated the Tarmac Delay Rule when it failed to provide passengers on board seven flights with the opportunity to deplane before the passengers on those flights experienced tarmac delays exceeding three hours as listed below.

Flight Number	Duration of the Delay	Number of Passengers
AA396	4 hours and 11 minutes	80 passengers
AA579	4 hours and 35 minutes	273 passengers
AA1152	3 hours and 33 minutes	94 passengers
AA1826	3 hours and 20 minutes	149 passengers
AA2719	4 hours and 36 minutes	155 passengers
AA3100	4 hours and 2 minutes	54 passengers
AA5813	3 hours and 38 minutes	60 passengers

Conclusion

Based on OACP's investigations into each of the 43 lengthy tarmac delays detailed above, none of the exceptions to the Tarmac Delay Rule apply. By failing to provide passengers on board these 43 domestic flights an opportunity to deplane before the tarmac delay exceeded three hours and by failing to provide adequate food and water to passengers onboard flight 1599, American failed to adhere to the terms of its contingency plan and violated 14 CFR 259.4. By violating 14 CFR 259.4 in these instances, American also violated 49 U.S.C. §§ 41712 and 42301.

Response

In response, American states that it takes very seriously its responsibility to comply with all of the Department's requirements, including the tarmac delay rule, and that American has fully cooperated with the Department's investigation of the flights at issue. American states that while its goal is to avoid any lengthy tarmac delays, the 43 American flights included in this enforcement

order represent less than 0.001% of the approximately 7.7 million flights operated by American and its regional partners during the period of 2018 to 2021. American states that it provided substantial compensation to affected passengers in connection with these events, as reflected by the Department's credit to American of over \$2 million of the assessed penalty under this Consent Order.

While accepting this compromise settlement with the Department, American respectfully disagrees that certain of these tarmac delays warrant enforcement action under the extreme circumstances presented. American states that, for example, the January 13, 2019 tarmac delay at DCA occurred in connection with a winter storm that caused severe disruption at the airport and beyond, including the closure of federal government offices and the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority subway and bus systems. American asserts that congestion resulted throughout the field at DCA due to circumstances outside the airline's control, and the airport also appeared unable to keep up with the weather and snow accumulated on the runways. Regarding the August 17, 2021 tarmac delay event at IAH when American diverted DFW-bound flights to that airport, American notes that two other air carriers also reported to the Department that they each had a Dallas-bound flight divert to IAH on August 17, 2021 and experienced tarmac delays there of 6 hours and 33 minutes and 3 hours and 26 minutes, respectively.

In mitigation, and without conceding the Department's recitation of facts and findings, American states that it has devoted significant management attention and investment to improving its performance on tarmac delays. American states that, for example, following the June 9, 2019 tarmac delay event at DFW, American undertook a comprehensive and systemwide root cause study and then implemented recommendations that emanated from it. American asserts that its efforts have contributed to a downward trend since 2019 in the incidence of lengthy tarmac delays for American, systemwide and at its DFW hub. American notes that its efforts at continuous improvement with respect to tarmac delays have included better training, procedures, tools, support services, and facilities. American states that as one such example, in 2022 it deployed a new Hub Efficiency Analytics Tool (HEAT), which American developed in house. American states that HEAT optimizes data about weather, how full our flights are, customer connections, and gate availability, as well as any air traffic control or crew constraints; then, an advanced algorithm weighs this data and shifts arrivals and departures around severe weather to help avoid conditions that can lead to lengthy tarmac delays.

Lastly, American notes that it respectfully disagrees with OACP's position that a separate violation occurs for each passenger onboard an aircraft subject to an excessive tarmac delay. American believes that the applicable statutes provide for civil penalties to be assessed on a per flight or per day basis. However, in the interest of settling this matter, and without conceding or waiving its legal position on that question or the other issues raised in this order, American has agreed to this compromise settlement.

Decision

OACP views seriously American's violations of 14 CFR 259.4 and 49 U.S.C. §§ 41712 and 42301. Accordingly, after carefully considering all the facts in this case, including those set forth above, OACP believes that enforcement action is warranted. In order to avoid litigation, American

consents to the following: 1) the issuance of this order; 2) to cease and desist from future violations of 14 CFR 259.4 and 49 U.S.C. §§ 41712 and 42301; and, 3) to the assessment of \$4.1 million in compromise of potential civil penalties otherwise due and payable pursuant to 49 U.S.C. § 46301. The compromise assessment is appropriate considering the nature and extent of the violations described herein and serves the public interest. It establishes a strong deterrent against future similar unlawful practices by American and other carriers.

This order is issued under the authority contained in 49 CFR Part 1.

ACCORDINGLY,

- 1. Based on the above discussion, we approve this settlement and the provisions of this order as being in the public interest;
- 2. We find that for the aforementioned 43 flights that occurred between 2018 and 2021, American Airlines, Inc., violated 49 U.S.C. § 42301 and 14 CFR 259.4¹⁸ by failing to adhere to the assurance in its contingency plan for lengthy tarmac delays that the carrier will not permit a flight to remain on the tarmac at a U.S. airport for more than three hours for domestic flights without providing passengers an opportunity to deplane;
- 3. We find that American Airlines, Inc., violated section 259.4(b)(3)¹⁹ by failing to provide adequate food and water to passengers onboard flight 1599 on August 16, 2020 no later than two hours after the aircraft touched down (in the case of an arrival);
- 4. We find that by engaging in the conduct and violations described in ordering paragraph 2 and 3, above, American Airlines, Inc., engaged in unfair and deceptive practices and unfair methods of competition in violation of 49 U.S.C. § 41712;
- 5. We order American Airlines, Inc., and its successors and assigns to cease and desist from further violations of 14 CFR 259.4 and 49 U.S.C. §§ 41712 and 42301; and
- 6. We assess American Airlines, Inc., \$4.1 million in compromise of civil penalties that might otherwise by assessed for the violations described above.
 - a. \$2,050,000 of the assessed penalty shall be due and payable within 30 days of the issuance of the order; and
 - b. \$2,050,000 of the assessed penalty shall be credited to American for compensation provided to passengers on the flights included in this order and for passengers on other delayed flights.

¹⁸ 14 CFR 259.4(b)(1), the version of Tarmac Delay Rule effective prior to June 2, 2021, applies to the 31 tarmac delays that occurred prior to June 2, 2021. 14 CFR 259.4(c)(1), the current version of the Tarmac Delay Rule, applies to the 12 tarmac delays that occurred after June 2, 2021.

¹⁹ As discussed above, 14 CFR 259.4(b)(3) has since been replaced by 14 CFR 259.4(c)(4).

7. We order American Airlines, Inc., to pay within 30 days of the issuance of this order the penalty assessed in Ordering Paragraph 6(a), above, by bank transfer. Payment shall be made in accordance with the instructions contained in the Attachment to this order. Failure to pay the penalty as ordered shall subject American Airlines, Inc., to the assessment of interest, penalty, and collection charges under the Debt Collection Act and to further enforcement action for failing to comply with this order.

This order will become a final order of the Department 10 days after its service date unless a timely petition for review is filed or the Department takes review on its own motion.

BY:

BLANE A. WORKIE
Assistant General Counsel
for the Office of Aviation Consumer Protection

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