



Air Traffic Control Privatization and the Pandemic

The Professional Aviation Safety Specialists (PASS), AFL-CIO, has long opposed any attempts to privatize the nation's air traffic control system. After years of pushing back on legislation introduced in Congress and attempts by the previous president to privatize the system, a five-year reauthorization of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) was signed into law in October 2018 without any privatization language.

During the pandemic, air travel around the world plummeted and how other nations dealt with their privatized air traffic control systems speaks volumes about why PASS has always maintained that air traffic control is an inherently governmental function. PASS member Pat Delaney serves as the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) representative from the International Federation of Air Traffic Safety Electronics Associations (IFATSEA), of which PASS is a member. In the following article, he examines the consequences of outsourcing air traffic control.

COVID-19 Pandemic and Air Navigation Service Providers

The covid-19 pandemic has reached the one-year milestone. The pandemic has wreaked unforeseen havoc on the world's economies. Who would have thought we would be told to say home from work and school with only essential businesses open—all others closed. The roadways in the United States became barren as well as the skies. The U.S. airline industry slowed to a level not seen since September 11, 2001: only this time it would last for months. The world-wide airline industry has been hit the hardest. The demand for air travel was crippled by the public's fear of the infectious disease and being trapped in an aircraft for hours. Countries imposing travel restrictions also reduced the demand for international flights.

As air travel slowed, air traffic operations were also reduced to unimaginable levels. Many air navigation service providers (ANSPs) quickly found their revenue streams dry up. Over the past 30 years, many ANSPs around the globe have broken ties with government and became privatized or were made quasi-governmental organizations. The sole source of income for private ANSPs is generated from user fees, based on the weight of aircraft, distance flown and air traffic services provided. Two-thirds of the FAA is funded by the Airport and Airways Trust Fund (AATF), passenger taxes and commercial/general aviation fuel taxes along with fees from aircraft which fly through U.S. controlled airspace. The last third of FAA funding come from the federal government.

The pandemic spread across the globe with no end in sight. ANSPs began to seek financial relief to maintain critical air navigation services. Many ANSPs had to reevaluate their own situations and some had to furlough employees or reduce wages. Two of the hardest hit ANSPs were NATS in the United Kingdom and NAV Canada. Both support en route services between North America and Europe. NATS secured vital loans to continue providing air traffic services. NAV Canada requested government assistance only to be denied. They had to look elsewhere, first by accepting early retirements, and then, controllers who were not trained/certified were let go. As the pandemic pushed into the fall of 2020 NAV Canada again had to look for more ways to cut costs to continue



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providing services. It closed some of the smaller towers, flight information centers and then NAV Canada worked with its technician and controller unions to furlough employees and ask for wage concessions.

Surprisingly, just a few short years ago NATS and NAV Canada were being touted as examples to privatize the FAA's air traffic organization. NATS took 10 years to privatize and NAV Canada took two years. If the last attempt at privatization had passed in Congress, we could have just completed or been half way through the transition. Either way, we would be standing in line asking Congress for financial assistance during the pandemic. We see how long it has taken Congress to act on relief for the American public. A privatized U.S. air traffic organization would also look at other ways to cut costs, like NAV Canada, with furloughed employees and wage concessions.

In the U.S., FAA employees have been extremely fortunate during the pandemic. We have not seen the measures other ANSPs have taken to stay operational. Through social distancing we have been able to continue to perform our duties the best we can. As we see the light at the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, the lesson learned should be that the FAA's air traffic organization is an inherently governmental operation, part of our national security and a critical component of the nation's economy as it recovers from the pandemic downturn.

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