



International Civil Aviation Organization
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Agenda Item 8: Other Matters

UNITED STATES PREPARATIONS FOR PANDEMIC INFLUENZA

INFORMATION PAPER

(Presented by the United States of America)

SUMMARY

The U.S. Government has undertaken a massive planning effort to stop, slow or limit the spread of a novel influenza virus and sustain services that are essential to protecting our citizens and maintaining our economy. We have developed a National Strategy for Pandemic Influenza and a supporting Implementation Plan, which articulate an overarching national approach to preparedness, response, and recovery. The planning effort is geared toward the worst-case scenario of a severe pandemic similar to the 1918 Spanish influenza.

The U.S. Government and other key stakeholders worked with ICAO to develop pandemic influenza planning guidelines for States, airlines, and airports. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), and our partners are also engaged with key States and other multilateral forums. Recognizing the critical linkages and interdependence among our aviation systems, the United States, Canada, and Mexico have developed a joint Concept of Operations (CONOPS) for cooperative aviation operations during a pandemic.

1 Background

1.1 US National Planning

1.2 In accordance with the National Strategy and Implementation Plan, all departments and agencies within the Federal government have developed detailed plans to sustain essential services, including the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the FAA, and the TSA. The Federal agencies responsible for taking counter measures are working to develop interagency operational plans to contain the spread of pandemic influenza and support national efforts to limit the loss of life and impact on the nation's economy, infrastructure, and way of life.

1.3 The Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) will lead U.S. health and medical response efforts and will be the principal Federal spokesperson for public health issues, coordinating closely with DHS on public messaging pertaining to the pandemic. As the Principal Federal Official for domestic incident management, the Secretary of Homeland Security will coordinate Federal operations and resources, establish reporting requirements, and communicate with Federal, State, local, and tribal governments, the private sector, and non-governmental organizations. The Secretary of Homeland Security will coordinate overall non-medical support and response actions and ensure that all Federal agencies support HHS in the coordination of public health and medical emergency response efforts.

1.4 The Secretary of Transportation and the FAA will maintain essential transportation functions and play a critical role in aviation-related containment and response efforts. The FAA is an important player in the Strategy and Implementation Plan because of the focus on the aviation system as a primary vector for the disease. The FAA will work closely with the Department of State (DOS), DHS, HHS, international organizations, and host governments to facilitate an international aviation response.

1.5 In addition to developing pandemic response plans at each level of government, our different departments are working together to establish a national policy on entry/exit screening to impede the spread of the disease. Our planning assumptions are based largely on guidance provided by the HHS Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

- The pandemic could start at any time, at any location.
- Once the virus comes to the United States, we may experience simultaneous outbreaks in different locations, with waves lasting 6-8 weeks at a time in a given location.
- The total pandemic may last from 12 to 18 months or longer.
- Not all regions may be affected simultaneously.
- As much as 40% of the workforce may be absent at the peak of the localized outbreak.
- Air travel will be reduced by the effects on aviation infrastructure and travel restrictions (either self-imposed or government-imposed).

1.6 The FAA's Air Traffic Organization (ATO) has developed a joint CONOPS with TSA, the Customs and Border Protection Agency (CBP), CDC, and the U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM) to coordinate the operational aviation response to a pandemic. Participating government agencies will use the CONOPS to enhance shared situational awareness and provide a well-coordinated, effective, and rapid response to aviation-related emergency situations during a pandemic. Heading the list of potential emergency situations is the management of flights that might be carrying persons or cargo infected with a dangerous pathogen, such as a pandemic influenza virus. Other possible situations involve movement of special responder teams and the shipment of items from the Strategic National Stockpile. To that end, the CONOPS outlines collective operational aviation response measures, as well as the associated roles and responsibilities of individual departments and agencies.

1.7 The CONOPS focuses on the activation of a Specialized Aviation Response Cell (SARC), which will support coordinated command and control among the participating government agencies for aviation operational response activities. To provide a fast response to pandemic emergencies, the SARC is limited to only essential agency representatives empowered by their agencies to make quick decisions in response to a fast-moving situation. The members of the SARC will probably include FAA, TSA, CBP, CDC, DOS, and the Department of Defense.

2 Discussion

2.1 Sustaining Essential Aviation Services

2.1.1 The U.S. Government is committed to sustaining essential aviation services, including operation of the National Airspace System (NAS), continuing safety oversight, and providing international coordination and liaison.

2.1.2 We are urgently concerned about the potential risk for air traffic controllers, technicians, and other critical personnel who operate and maintain the NAS. The immediate impact of pandemic influenza on the agency will be employee absences and losses. Efforts to protect and optimize the use of available personnel and secure replacements (e.g., rehiring recently retired personnel) will be critical. The FAA is conducting a study to assess capacity against projected rates of absenteeism to ensure that any reduction in air traffic service capacity will be, to the extent practicable, mitigated, controlled, and predictable. In addition, ATO is developing operational contingency measures to sustain critical air navigation and other services needed to support the NAS and national response efforts. The FAA plans to cope with these staffing losses through such options as rehiring recently retired personnel and expanded teleworking for support staff. Operational contingency measures include traffic flow management, reduced service hours, and shifting of personnel. The ATO is also exploring the possibility of shifting responsibilities between air traffic facilities when severe staffing losses hit one facility. In addition, the FAA is working to establish an agency-wide strategy to implement measures to protect personnel based on guidance from the CDC, which include social distancing, enhanced hygiene, and respiratory etiquette.

2.1.3 We are also concerned about the FAA's ability to oversee aviation safety and ensure the airworthiness of aircraft; qualifications of pilots, mechanics, and others in safety-related positions; and the continued safety of all operational and maintenance enterprises in domestic civil aviation. A pandemic could have a serious impact on the hundreds of inspectors who regularly perform certification and surveillance of operations, maintenance, and manufacturing. The FAA has studied this problem and is prepared to mitigate the impact through a combination of prioritization, remote data accessing, and temporary substitution of regular inspectors.

2.2 International Aviation

2.2.1 The international aviation system is likely to be the primary vector for the spread of any pandemic virus throughout the world, considering the speed of travel, the global reach of aviation, the volume of traffic, and the close proximity of passengers to one another. As no country can effectively slow the spread of the disease alone, efforts to curtail an international spread of a pandemic must focus on aviation and cooperation with other nations. During the early stages of a pandemic, the United States intends to take a risk-based and layered approach to international traveler health screening that may include exit screening at the point of embarkation, enroute screening, and entry screening at the point of arrival of all air travelers who wish to enter the United States. The screening of international travelers will utilize a toolbox of measures that will assess the characteristics of an individual traveler that could make him or her a potential threat to public health in the United States and North America.

2.2.2 The FAA, DHS, HHS/CDC, and other key stakeholders participated in the ICAO effort to develop pandemic influenza planning guidelines and standards. The FAA also

participated in an ICAO workshop held to introduce a program to evaluate airport preparedness in Southeast Asia and establish a network of experts in the region.

2.2.3 The FAA has expanded the SARC concept to trilateral cooperation with Canada and Mexico because our three national aviation systems are so closely intertwined. After initial bilateral meetings from May through August 2006, the three countries met in October 2006 and developed a joint CONOPS covering cooperative aviation operations during a pandemic based on the SARC concept. The meeting also served to enhance coordination of joint pandemic response efforts with the North American Aviation Trilateral (NAAT), the Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP), and the national health authorities of the three countries. All three countries signed the joint CONOPS in late 2006. Mexico recently hosted a second trilateral meeting on April 19-20, 2007, to refine further and follow-up on the CONOPS shared by the three countries. During that meeting, the participating agencies established detailed implementation mechanisms, including linkages between their respective aviation operational centers; lists of quarantine facility supported airports, and Air Traffic Management related protocols. In addition, the participants agreed to plan jointly an exercise to validate the CONOPS procedures, which they may conduct as early as this summer.

2.2.4 In other international outreach efforts, the FAA has raised the prospect of future pandemic cooperation with Latin American countries through presentations at meetings conducted under the Regional Aviation Safety Oversight System (RASOS) and the ICAO Caribbean and South America Regional Planning Group (GREPECAS). The FAA has also begun exchanging information with the European Civil Aviation Conference (ECAC).

3 Conclusion

3.1 Efforts to curtail and mitigate the impact of a pandemic virus must focus on the international aviation sector, which is likely to be the primary vector for the spread of the disease. Close international cooperation is required because the national aviation systems in the world are so closely intertwined that no country can mount an effective response by acting alone. Therefore, the United States recommends cooperative bilateral and multilateral efforts to coordinate plans and actions among the RAAC members. This cooperation could begin with exchanges of information on pandemic response efforts, followed by coordination of those aspects of our plans that affect other States.