WASHINGTON, D.C. – The U.S. Department of Transportation responded to a study released today by a pair of aviation consultants, purporting to show that the DOT’s rule establishing time-limits on tarmac delays hurts, rather than helps, consumers. The study, conducted by two business consultants for aviation companies, offers a misleading and premature assessment of the impact of the new passenger protections.

The study released today, based on one month of airline on-time data in May 2010, is far too narrow to yield defensible conclusions about future airline trends. Further, the data reported in May 2010 does not support the industry consultants’ claims about rising numbers of airline cancellations. While there was a slight increase in airline cancellations in May 2010 compared with May 2009, an analysis of May cancellations over the last 15 years shows that cancellations in May 2010 were below average. In fact, the rate of airline cancellations in May 2010 was below the average rate for all 15 previous Mays with comparable data: 1.24% in May 2010 compared to the average of 1.51%.

“Airlines know the rules and they know they have to take passenger protections into account when making scheduling and operational decisions,” said Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood. “The Department of Transportation is committed to protecting the rights of airline passengers – starting with firm limits on tarmac delays – and no one should be misled by this unreliable study.”

The same May 2010 data show many cases in which airlines did take the appropriate action to avoid lengthy tarmac delays without canceling flights. In May 2010, there were 86 incidents in which airlines took action to ensure passengers were not stuck on the tarmac for more than 3 hours and still delivered them to their scheduled destination. In May 2009, there were only 22 such incidents.

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Briefing Room