

# How to Make the DOT's Aviation Consumer Protection Program Work for You

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Are you, like many travelers, hesitant to check your bags because an airline lost your luggage the last time you traveled? Or are you departing for an afternoon business meeting the night before because your last flight was hours delayed? If you call the Department of Transportation for help, since they regulate such matters, you may be spun and tossed around like a basketball on the fingertips of a squad of Harlem Globetrotters. More useful is the DOT's Aviation Consumer Protection Program's **Air Travel Consumer Report** (<http://airconsumer.ost.dot.gov/reports/index.htm>) -- a valuable tool to help you make wise decisions *before* you book your flight.

The quarterly publication chronicles the performance records of major carriers regarding lost and mishandled luggage, delays, overbooking, and consumer complaints registered with the DOT. For example, the site reports that Hawaiian Airlines had the highest overall percentage of reported on-time arrivals for the month of October 2004 (the most recent figures available) at 95.3%. Continental was next, with 87.7% on-time flights.

You can also see which airports had the promptest service: George Bush International, in Houston, had the best record for October 2004, with 88.8% on-time arrivals. You can check an airline or airport's records according to a particular time of day as well. Houston did best, for example, between 6am and 6:59am, with 96.8% on-time flights; and they fared poorest between 11pm and 5:59am, with 86.2% on-time flights. Likewise, the Consumer Report lays out comparative performance records regarding lost luggage, overbooking, and consumer complaints. Both the airlines' and the airports' records are listed.

In theory, the Aviation Consumer Protection Program (ACPP) establishes the rules regarding lost luggage compensation and overbooking, and offers to serve as ombudsman for consumer grievances. In truth, however, if you file a complaint, it may end up as just another statistic in the Consumer Report -- which is better than nothing, as this information will be available for other travelers. If you're looking for immediate results, it's more effective to research your carrier's own policies -- which are also available on the ACPP website (<http://airconsumer.ost.dot.gov>) -- and use that information to appeal directly to the airline.

If you don't get anywhere with the carrier, complain to a website such as this one or a travel magazine with an ombudsman service, such as *Condé Nast Traveler*; your grievance is likely to receive greater exposure, which gives you stronger leverage, through the media than through the DOT.

The ACPP does publish some moderately useful booklets and leaflets regarding travel with pets, passengers with disabilities, getting the best fares, and holding onto your luggage, among other subjects related to air travel. For a full list of topics, see "Travel Tips and Publications" on the ACPP home page. You can download this information from the website or follow the instructions for ordering larger publications by mail.

In general, good research is your best defense. If you use the DOT's consumer protection services to arm yourself with information before you choose a carrier and airport, you're most apt to get the best service.

### **How to File a Complaint**

To file a complaint with the DOT's Aviation Consumer Protection Division, you can call either **202/366-2220** or 202-366-0511; send an e-mail to [airconsumer@ost.dot.gov](mailto:airconsumer@ost.dot.gov) or send a letter via U.S. Mail to

- Aviation Consumer Protection Division  
U.S. Department of Transportation  
400 7th Street, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20590

Be sure to register your name, address, phone number with area code, the airline name, flight date, flight number, and the cities where you began and ended your trip. If you're using snail mail, send a photocopy of your ticket and any additional communications you've had with the carrier.