

Flight Risk

**By Reg P. Wydeven
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In 1999, my wife and I flew to Naples, Florida, to spend a week with her parents who were snow-birding for the winter. Knowing we would be visiting, I asked her parents for her hand in marriage before they left and I planned on popping the question on our trip.

Because I was worried about losing my luggage, I kept the engagement ring in the breast pocket of my sweatshirt. Thankfully this was before 9/11, because I was undoubtedly the most nervous passenger in the history of flying and would have been flagged as a person of interest in the airport parking lot. I was sweating buckets and I patted my pocket every 17 seconds to ensure the ring was still there.

Sure enough, when we got to Florida the airline lost my bags. I was thrilled I had the ring, but strolling the beach in my sweatshirt and jeans was a tad balmy. The next day the airline found my luggage and I was able to wear shorts to the beach. I proposed as the sun set and every day since then I thank God that she said yes!

The elation of her agreeing to marry me far outweighed the inconveniences of the flight delay and the loss of my luggage. However, if I had been Mike Brady in that episode of 'The Brady Bunch' when he had to fly to Hawaii for an important business meeting, a delayed flight and the loss of my architectural plans would have been a huge problem.

That's why frequent flyers will be thrilled with the implementation last week by the U.S. Department of Transportation of new consumer protections for airline passengers. Under the new rules, airlines are required to refund any baggage fees if the bag is lost. Airlines are also mandated to prominently disclose all optional fees on their websites, including those for baggage, meals, canceling or changing reservations, or advanced or upgraded seating.

The amount of money passengers are eligible to receive if they are involuntarily bumped from an oversold flight also doubles under the new rules. In the past, passengers received cash equal to the one-way value of their tickets if they were bumped, up to \$400, if the airline was able to get them to their destination in less than two hours of their originally scheduled arrival time for domestic flights and four hours for international flights. If the delays were longer, they were entitled to double the one-way price of their tickets, up to \$800.

The new rules provide that passengers are entitled to double the price of their one-way tickets, up to \$650, for short delays and quadruple the price, up to \$1,300, for longer delays. These figures will be adjusted for inflation every other year.

In addition to lost luggage and bumps, the new rules also address tarmac delays. The existing ban will extend to international flights of foreign airlines at U.S. airports, and impose a four-hour time limit on tarmac delays for all international flights at U.S. airports. The current three-hour tarmac delay limit for domestic flights in place only at large-hub and medium-hub airports will now also cover flights at small-hub and non-hub airports.

Any lengthy tarmac delays must be reported to the DOT and delays are only allowed for safety, security or air traffic control-related reasons. Passengers subject to tarmac delays must be furnished with food and water after two hours, in addition to lavatories and necessary medical care.

Starting on January 24, 2012, airlines will be required to abide by additional requirements, including the disclosure of baggage fees when passengers book a flight and ensuring the same baggage fees apply throughout a passenger's journey.

When we fly to Florida next year for my parents' 50th wedding anniversary, I'll try to get bumped as much as I can so we can earn enough to go on a second honeymoon.

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