

Travel industry fears damage from government shutdown

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Associated Press

America's busiest airport, Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International, is a blur of activity on the best of days. But an extra layer of anxiety gripped the airport Friday, the eve of a three-day holiday weekend. The partial government shutdown — the longest ever — has thinned the ranks of federal workers who staff airport security lines. And some travelers had braced for the worst.

"I have a 3 o'clock flight, and I arrived at 10:15 a.m.," Beth Lambert said while waiting to check in at a Delta Air Lines counter as her 5-year-old, Michael, rode around on his wheeled bag like a scooter. "We're going to be hanging out for a while."

The scene at most of the nation's airports has so far been marked more by concerned passengers showing up early than by missed flights. Longer lines are evident at some airports. But delays resulting from a rise in federal security screeners calling in sick have been slight.

Yet concern is quickly growing. President Donald Trump and Democrats in Congress remain far apart over Trump's insistence on funding for a wall along the Mexican border as the price of reopening the government. With the two sides trading taunts and avoiding talks, travel industry analysts and economists have been calculating the potential damage should the shut-

down drag into February or beyond.

Airlines and hotels would suffer. So would parks and restaurants that cater to travelers. And, eventually, the broader U.S. economy, already absorbing a trade war with China and a global economic slowdown, would endure another blow.

The travel and tourism industries generate about \$1.6 trillion in U.S. economic activity — one-twelfth of the economy — and 1 in 20 jobs, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce. Macroeconomic Advisers says it now expects the economy to expand at just a 1.4 percent annual rate in the first three months of this year, down from its previous forecast of 1.6 percent, because of reduced government spending during the shutdown.

America's air-travel system faced its sternest test over the weekend, which coincides with Martin Luther King Jr. Day today, a federal holiday.

On Friday, the Transportation Security Administration sent a small team of extra screeners to beef up checkpoints at the airport in Newark, New Jersey, which has had among the longest lines in the country last week.

The TSA predicted it will screen over 8 million passengers between Friday and today, up 10.8 percent from last year's MLK weekend. And it will do so with fewer screeners. On Thursday, the TSA said 6.4 percent of screeners missed work — nearly double the 3.8 percent rate on the same day in 2018.



AP Photo/Lynne Sladky

Travelers organize their luggage before entering a security checkpoint at Miami International Airport on Friday.

A TSA spokesman said the agency was offering overtime to screeners, though those workers wouldn't be paid — for their regular pay or for overtime — until the shutdown eventually ends.

Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International, home to Delta Air Lines, has likely been the hardest hit airport. Delta said this week that the shutdown will cost it \$25 million in January because fewer federal employees and contractors will be flying. By contrast, United Airlines, which has a substantial presence around

Washington, D.C., said it hasn't felt much impact yet.

But the airlines fear that if the shutdown doesn't end soon, more TSA agents will call in sick or quit. A shortage of screeners would cause security lines to swell. Air traffic controllers, who are also working without pay, say they, too, are short-staffed. If the controller shortage became severe enough, the government could restrict the number of flights, though some analysts think that's unlikely.

"Luckyly this is the low season — January is one of the weakest months of the

year," said Savanthi Syth, an airline analyst for Raymond James. "This spilling into February is a real concern. The risk is that the longer this drags out, it might cause some passengers to say, 'I don't want to deal with all the hassle, maybe I won't take that trip.'"

Consumers are, in fact, taking a dimmer view of the economy, in part because of the shutdown. A measure of consumer confidence fell this month by the most in more than six years, according to the University of Michigan, which conducts the survey. If Amer-

icans were to cut back on travel and other discretionary spending, it would weaken consumer spending, the U.S. company's primary fuel.

Laura Mandala, who runs a travel and tourism research firm, said the shutdown might discourage international travelers, too.

"These uncertainties will result in fewer conferences being booked," Mandala said, leading to "convention and hotel staff layoffs, reduced schedules, resulting in less income for workers to spend in the local economy."

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Rating: BRONZE

Solution to 1/20/19

6	5	2						
		5	4		2			
3		6			9	4		
9					3			
2		1	7				4	
	4					6		
5	7			6	3			
8			3	1				
				4	8	7		

6	4	5	2	7	9	1	8	3
9	1	8	5	4	3	7	2	6
7	3	2	6	1	8	9	4	5
5	9	1	4	6	2	3	7	8
2	6	3	1	8	7	5	9	4
8	7	4	3	9	5	2	6	1
1	5	7	8	2	6	4	3	9
4	8	9	7	3	1	6	5	2
3	2	6	9	5	4	8	1	7

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