Wire upgrade at fault for grounding all US flights

16th November 2026



Thousands of flights across the USA were grounded on Friday the 13th following a major communications failure in the country's air traffic control system. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) ordered a nationwide ground stop after problems with radar and communications equipment. More than 3,500 airplanes were in the air at the time. Thousands of flights were cancelled, leaving passengers stranded at airports nationwide. The problem was eventually traced to an overloaded router, possibly as a result of maintenance work to replace decades-old copper wires with fibre-optic cables. The FAA lifted the ground stop almost five hours later. Operations may take days to return to normal.

The incident sparked widespread concern. Officials quickly reassured the public that it was not another 9/11. The US homeland security secretary said there had been no indication of a cyberattack or national security threat. He described the incident as a "telecommunications outage". Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy blamed the failure on outdated infrastructure. He said: "We have old switches and old routers. We use 1980s little copper lines." He added: "It's an old system that went down. It went down everywhere. It got overloaded." Duffy warned that systems would "continue to break" unless Congress allocated extra funds. He said: "I can't build things if I don't have money."

Sources: yahoo.com / *theguardian.com* / *bbc.com*

Writing

Airports should always have the very latest technology. Discuss.

Chat

Talk about these words from the article.

flights / Friday the 13th / communications / air traffic control / airplanes / router / incident / concern / security / cyberattack / telecommunications / failure / systems

True / False

1) The article says tens of thousands of flights in the US were grounded. T / F
2) Over 3,500 planes were in the air when the ground stop was announced. T / F
3) The problem was identified as a defect in fibre-optic cables. T / F
4) The FAA said it would be two weeks for normal services to be resumed. T / F
5) Officials told the public the incident was not another 9/11 attack. T / F
6) The homeland security secretary said it was a communications outrage. T / F
7) The transportation secretary said the system used wires from the 1980s. T / F
8) The transportation secretary said he needed more funds. T / F

Synonym Match

(The words in **bold** are from the news article.)

1.	**major**	a.	set off
2.	**failure**	b.	ancient
3.	**equipment**	c.	removed
4.	**stranded**	d.	breakdown
5.	**lifted**	e.	cease to function
6.	**sparked**	f.	serious
7.	**indication**	g.	distributed
8.	**outdated**	h.	helpless
9.	**break**	i.	sign
10.	**allocated**	j.	hardware

Discussion – Student A

a) What do you think of flying?
b) Do you ever worry about Friday the 13th?
c) What things does an air traffic controller do?
d) How bad is a communications failure in air traffic control systems?
e) How would you feel if you were in the air then?
f) How safe or dangerous is flying?
g) Why are countries still using copper and not fibre-optic cables?
h) What can we do to make flying better?

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Phrase Match

1.	Thousands of flights across the USA	a.	overloaded
2.	following a major communications	b.	equipment
3.	problems with radar and communications	c.	with fibre-optic cables
4.	More than 3,500 airplanes were	d.	funds
5.	replace decades-old copper wires	e.	in the air at the time
6.	The incident sparked	f.	were grounded
7.	there had been no indication	g.	down
8.	It's an old system that went	h.	widespread concern
9.	It got	i.	failure
10.	Congress allocated extra	j.	of a cyberattack

Discussion – Student B

a) What do you think about what you read?
b) How often are you concerned about news?
c) How often are you concerned about cyberattacks?
d) Has your country experienced a national security threat?
e) What is the infrastructure in your country like?
f) Have you ever been overloaded?
g) What is the future of flying?
h) What questions would you like to ask an aviation expert?

Spelling

1. a major isocmtomniunca failure
2. The Federal iaivtnAo Administration
3. radar and communications pmniueqte
4. The problem was evuetlanyl traced
5. as a result of neaentciman
6. fibre-ptoci cables
7. The dteninci sparked widespread concern
8. no indication of a tyecktrcaab
9. outdated tcusaritrrfenu
10. old hsetcisw
11. eoprpc lines
12. lldeaoact extra funds

Answers – Synonym Match

1. f	2. d	3. j	4. h	5. c
6. a	7. i	8. b	9. e	10. g

Comprehension Questions

Listen to / read the news article. Answer these questions. (Answers are on p. 27 of the 27-page PDF.)

1.	How many flights were grounded?
2.	How many airplanes were in the air at the time of the ground stop?
3.	What happened to many passengers?
4.	What piece of equipment may have been overloaded?
5.	How long did the ground stop last?
6.	What did officials say wasn't happening?
7.	What did the homeland security secretary describe the incident as being?
8.	What did the homeland security secretary blame the failure on?
9.	Where did the homeland security secretary say the system went down?
10.	What does the homeland security secretary want Congress to allocate?

Speaking – Extra Funds

Rank these with your partner. Put the best things governments can spend extra funds on at the top. Change partners often and share your rankings.

- Aviation safety
- Education
- Healthcare
- Data centres
- Policing
- Roads and railways
- Renewables
- Defence

Answers – True False

1	F	2	T	3	F	4	F	5	T	6	F	7	T	8	T

Answers to Phrase Match and Spelling are in the text.

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