any who work in the surface freight transportation industry spend a lot of time traveling, and it has been a terrible year for air travel. But we may be able to apply some of the lessons we learn from the current air transportation mess to future problems we are likely to face in freight transportation.

A recap of aviation woes sounds eerily familiar to those of us in freight transportation.

● As bad as air traffic is today, forecasts call for three times as much volume by 2025. Officials at the Federal Aviation Administration estimate that air traffic delays will increase by almost two-thirds by 2014.

● Congestion is rampant throughout the system. Airports don’t have enough runways and/or terminals to handle increased flight volume, and the air traffic control system is woefully out-of-date.

● Stakeholder frustration and anger is growing. A consumer advocacy movement is developing, and the government is being asked to play a greater oversight role.

● The infrastructure has failed to keep up. Efforts to expand infrastructure extend for decades because of review processes and local objections. Most airports are 25 to 50 years old, and the air traffic control system has not been state-of-the-art since the 1950s.

The air transportation system — like its surface twin — is an asset-based, network-operating system. It is impossible to evaluate individual components independently, as traffic flows in national and international corridors.

Some parts of the system are more important than others. For the air network, the New York area is crucial. According to the FAA, six of the 10 most heavily traveled air corridors involve New York, with one-third of the nation’s air traffic passing through its airspace. The region also accounts for 75 percent of national delays; the three U.S. airports with the lowest on-time performance are Newark, JFK, and LaGuardia.

As with all networks, economies of scope and scale are paramount. Still, the air system seems to be taking a slightly different approach to these economies than other modes. To increase service frequency — and maintain density — the airlines increasingly are using regional jets. The smaller planes consume resources almost equal to big planes, adding to congestion, although the passengers on five or six regional jets could be transported on a single, larger plane. (In this case, scope trumps scale.)

Solutions will require technology, policy and funding. A technology solution has been awaiting implementation for more than 20 years: Most believe that satellite-based navigation, which would enable more planes to fly closer together, must be deployed to replace World War II-era radar.

But the various users of the systems disagree strongly about user fees. Airlines point out that a 737 flying between New York and Chicago pays $1,356 in user fees, while a Gulfstream only pays $161. The FAA has estimated that private planes consume 16 percent of the system’s overhead, yet pay only 3 percent of the expense. The FAA has proposed increasing user fees and landing fees for private planes, but fierce opposition exists from that sector.

Securing funding for the necessary improvements to the air system is challenging. The Airway and Airport Trust Fund is overextended because it is used to pay for FAA operations — not just infrastructure. Current funding will not meet spending needs.

President Bush and Secretary of Transportation Mary Peters have been addressing this situation. Despite their aversion to active governmental involvement, it appears that intervention is mandated and may well be possible. Leading up to the Thanksgiving holiday, compensation to consumers was increased, and military airspace was temporarily opened up to increase capacity.

The DOT also is considering radical initiatives such as congestion-pricing, reducing scheduled flights into overcrowded hubs and re-auctioning landing slots.

These actions stand in marked contrast to the lack of measures taken by the federal government to address the surface freight transportation system, which faces similar capacity problems. This lack of vigilance discourages many in our industry who feel that freight is largely ignored by policymakers. The DOT’s active approach to aviation needs to serve as a model for surface freight capacity constraints industrywide. If the aversion to federal intervention has been overcome once, it can be overcome again — and it should be.

Ted Prince is president of Consolidated Chassis Management LLC. He can be contacted at (804) 754-2291, or at tprince@ccmpool.com.