

Record number of people riding Amtrak

By Laurence Arnold
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Amtrak registered the most successful summer in its 29-year history, carrying more than 6.1 million riders from June through August.

The railway reported yesterday that it broke a 21-year-old monthly record in August with 2,097,471 riders and set an all-time monthly mark in ticket revenue with \$108.4 million.

Those numbers followed a July in which Amtrak registered 10-year highs in riders and revenue.

With one month left in the fiscal year, Amtrak expects to break the all-time yearly record of 22.2 million passengers, set in 1990.

"Through these record-breaking numbers, we see that Americans are responding to our guarantee of guest satisfaction, better service and competitive fares."

George Warrington
Amtrak President

Amtrak officials attributed the numbers to higher gas prices, monumental air travel problems, successful marketing and a new service guarantee program that promises unhappy riders a reimbursement coupon good for future travel — no questions asked.

Amtrak had expected 0.1 percent of its riders to register dissatisfaction with their travel experience. In August, 0.5 percent of riders did.

Of the nearly 2.1 million riders in August, 10,689 called the railway's toll-free number to register a service complaint. Amtrak responded with \$934,430 in coupons. The average coupon was for \$87.

Amtrak has consumed more than \$22 billion in government subsidies since Congress formed it 1971 from a collection of failing passenger railroads.

It reports monthly revenues but not expenses.

The railroad registered record revenue in fiscal year 1999.

But it still lost \$476 million.

Even with record-breaking numbers, Amtrak will lose money again this year.

Scientist's release prolonged

Judge James Parker gave no reason for putting off Wen Ho Lee's hearing.

By Richard Benke
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — The expected release of Wen Ho Lee was delayed Monday as prosecutors and Lee's defense team haggled over a plea deal that would release the jailed Los Alamos nuclear scientist.

U.S. District Judge James Parker gave no reason for putting off a scheduled court hearing until today.

"I must regretfully say that we cannot proceed with the hearing this afternoon," the judge said.

"There are some issues that may require some amendment to the plea agreement."

Lee's daughter, Alberta, left the packed courtroom in tears and her mother, Sylvia, appeared dazed.

Defense attorneys declined to comment on the delay.

Justice Department officials in Washington, D.C. also refused to comment.

Under the deal described Sunday by government sources, Lee was expected to drop allegations that he was targeted because he is Chinese, claims included in a lawsuit against the FBI and the U.S. Departments of Energy and Justice.

His attorney in the case, Brian Sun, said Monday that the lawsuit is "still viable."

According to the sources, Lee had agreed to plead guilty to only one of 59 counts accusing him of violating national security.

His sentence was to be the nine months he has already served in solitary confinement.

In exchange for his freedom, Lee was expected to explain what he knows about seven computer tapes he was accused of downloading. Lee — whose defense contended he was targeted only because he is ethnic Chinese — has insisted the tapes were destroyed at the lab. His willingness to explain in more detail what happened was described as the turning point in 2-month-old plea discussions.

Polygamists pull hundreds of children from school

By Robert Gehrke
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

COLORADO CITY, Ariz. — Hundreds of members of a polygamist Mormon splinter group have pulled their children out of the public schools along the Utah-Arizona state line — preparing, perhaps, for the end of the world.

Only about 350 students have enrolled in the four schools in the desert towns of Colorado City and Hildale, Utah, compared with 1,400 last year. Dozens of teachers belonging to the Fundamental Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have also quit.

They acted at the direction of Warren Jeffs, who speaks on behalf of his aged father, Rulon Jeffs, the church's prophet. In mid-July, Warren Jeffs ordered followers to take their children out of school and cut off contact with former church members.

Church members said they are taking charge of their children's education and schooling them at home, just like other parents across the country. Other people, particularly former members, said the Jeffs' followers are preparing for the apocalypse their leaders say is at hand.

DeLoy Bateman, a former church member and a science teacher at the Colorado City high school, said church leaders are preaching that the towns will be lifted into heaven with the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

Around the twin communities, the End of Days is rumored to be either a few days or a few months away.

In a statement, the Jeffses said: "The Fundamental Church and its officers have not made any predictions in regard to the exact date of the Second Coming. It has long been the teaching of the church that no man knows the hour or the date of that event."



Lenore Holm and husband Milton pose with their children. The couple refused to allow their 16-year-old daughter, not shown in photo, to become the second wife of a 39-year-old man.

Netherlands' lawmakers approve gay marriage legislation

By Anthony Deutch
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

THE HAGUE, Netherlands — The Netherlands lawmakers yesterday gave same-sex couples the right to marriage and all the trappings, including adoption and divorce — approving legislation that gives gays rights beyond those offered in any other country.

The new law will bring little change to the daily lives of most gays in a country that has long been at the vanguard of gay rights. But activists say it marks a bold step toward recognizing the equality of gay and heterosexual unions in the Netherlands.

Lawmakers thumped their desks in approval when the vote passed 109-33 in the lower house, and some of the scores of witnesses in the packed public gallery applauded and embraced.

The bill still needs approval by the upper house, considered a formality, and is expected to take effect next year.

Opponents warned the legislation will isolate the Netherlands and said it threatens Dutch values.

"We are going in the completely wrong direction," said lawmaker Kees van der Staaij of the Reformed Political Party. "We are ending an age-old tradition anchored in the Bible."

Under the bill, gay couples can convert their current "registered same-sex partnerships" to full-fledged marriages, complete with wider adoption rights and guidelines for divorce.

However, they are barred from adopting children overseas because of potential confrontation with countries that don't allow gays to marry.

"We now have a choice," said Mark Wagenbuur who came to The Hague to witness the vote with his partner, Lei Lennaerts, and two other gay friends. Wagenbuur, 34, and Lennaerts, 35, don't plan any adoptions.

But the couple said they will formalize

their long-standing relationship with a formal marriage. "Should I ask his father for his hand or should he ask mine?" Wagenbuur asked with a laugh.

The law puts the Dutch at the forefront of the gay rights movement, a position held by Denmark since that country gave official sanction to gay marriages in 1989.

Danish gay couples enjoy the same rights as heterosexuals except for the right to adopt children. In May 1999, they won the right to adopt their partner's children but adoption from outside the marriage remains forbidden.

Sweden also allows gays to register as couples with most of the rights of marriage.

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