

Opinion: In-flight wireless ban needs more study

Kate Hanni

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Wireless communication products have become an integral part of our everyday lives — especially when we travel. Unfortunately, Congress recently introduced a bill that would ban passengers from using wireless devices on commercial flights. Such a policy could place an excessive and unreasonable hardship on millions of Americans who travel by air.

The primary purpose of the bill is to reauthorize the Federal Aviation Administration. In addition, it will modernize our nation's air traffic control system and implement a much-needed Airline Passenger Bill of Rights.

However, the bill also includes a provision that would prohibit airline passengers from using wireless telecommunications devices. While this may be well-intentioned, Congress should not impose such a far-reaching ban without first reviewing all the relevant facts and implications, including how the law will affect U.S. passengers.

For over 17 months now, 16 international air carriers have offered in-flight wireless telecommunications services, spanning three continents with vastly diverse cultures in 36 nations, serving close to 200 city destinations. The services have been offered on roughly 220 separate routes to almost a half a million people already. The carriers that offer these services have employed extensive measures to help ensure that their usage in the cabin is both safe and courteous.

Anyone who travels frequently knows how common it is for flights to be delayed while in the air. En route, or circling above the airport, knowing you are going to miss your connection, and thinking that you would give anything to be able to contact the airline to get yourself on the next available flight. Virtually all of us have been on flights where we dearly wanted to get the results of a medical test, participate in that conference call, or be able to send and receive e-mails and text messages.

Before imposing a ban, Congress should also examine the potential social issues that some have argued might arise as a result. If such social issues are already documented, or if there is expert opinion available, the public has a right to know about this as well.

Bans are traditionally used in situations to protect the health and lives of citizens. If the goal of this law is to prevent loud talkers from annoying their seatmates, Congress should consider less drastic solutions. After all, there are policies and procedures already in place around the world to ensure appropriate phone etiquette.

For these reasons, Congress should consider directing the National Academy of Science or an appropriate body to conduct a study on any potential social issues that may result from in-flight communications. The study should solicit feedback and input from all stakeholders including airline professionals, passengers, passenger rights groups and the telecommunications industry.

Despite much hard work, the FAA bill has been stuck on the tarmac for too long. It now appears that many of the stumbling blocks to final passage of this critically important legislation may be cleared. But by including a ban on in-flight communications in the newly introduced bill without needed input and information, Congress could be creating a new and controversial roadblock to sending the FAA bill to the president's desk.

Before creating more delays to final passage, Congress should consider the viewpoints of all the stakeholders and the real-world experience of in-flight communications overseas. There is simply too much at stake to impose a federal ban without the benefit of a full review of all data information and expert analysis available.

Kate Hanni is the executive director of the Coalition for an Airline Passengers' Bill of Rights. She wrote this article for the Mercury News.