

Departures

Opinions On Current Issues In Aviation

Let Data Decide Whether To Allow Phone Calls On Commercial Flights

By Carl Biersack

Modernizing our national air transport system is a congressional priority because it will make our skies safer and more efficient. In these troubled economic times it is also of vital national interest to include policies that will create jobs and facilitate commerce. Despite the resolution of many major issues confronting passage of the FAA [reauthorization] bill this year, it appears there still remain some significant policy hurdles. As the U.S. Senate enters the policy debate with the expected introduction of its bill in the coming weeks, I would like to speak to one issue.

A provision in the House-passed FAA bill would ban all wireless voice communications on commercial flights. This idea was inserted without the benefit of any relevant scientific data or sufficient stakeholder input. Currently, a million passengers monthly ride on commercial air carriers that provide inflight communications in the international airspace. It works. Wireless voice communication has been working in Asia, Europe and the Middle East for over 18 months. Congress should formally examine this information as it considers domestic aviation policy.

Before a ban is imposed, experts should have input. Recently, a wide range of passenger rights groups, industry and small business associations have asked Congress to conduct a study that includes their input before a final decision is made. It makes good sense for people who have actually been on flights with the technology to share their experience with decision-makers. Interestingly, 80% of those surveyed, who were on a flight with voice capability, responded that they would take another flight that offers the service.

Even manners experts have commented that Americans could handle this service, if offered. All the available data demonstrate that they are doing it in international airspace without difficulty. Given the virtually seamless deployment of the service in overseas markets, it begs the question: Are American passengers less courteous? Are overseas flight crews more able to manage it? As an American, it is my sincere hope that neither is the case. Nonetheless, if there are cultural barriers unique to our nation that would prevent the safe deployment, this should be es-

tablished by expert analysis, not hypothetical opinions.

Congress historically roots bans in health and safety matters, and this needs to be preserved. A study is the only way to establish the foundation for inflight communications issues because once Congress bans something for less than scientific reasons, the [practice] will open Pandora's box to other potential annoyances that may arise in our daily lives.

History shows that as technologies evolve, society tends to develop protocols for their safe and efficient usage. There are a number of limitations that will prove instructive to ameliorate concerns expressed by ban proponents. For instance, due to bandwidth, only six lines are available on flights. For this reason, only a small number of passengers are making calls at the same time. Likewise, international roaming rates apply for the calls, which keep the vast majority of calls under two minutes in length. Also, the crew has the ability to turn the service off and opt to do so during overnight flights. Also, the technology is proven to be completely safe — it does not interfere with any aircraft technology and its signal cannot reach the cockpit or the baggage compartment. These measures are worthy of a fair hearing.

Wireless voice technology in the air represents a \$1 billion annual marketplace where U.S. companies are not participating today. Deployment of this inflight technology could help create more jobs and provide a new positive revenue stream for air carriers and telecommunications businesses as well as provide tangible benefits for passengers. Congress should direct that the issue be carefully studied before proceeding to a ban. Congress must call upon real world data from stakeholders before imposing a statutory ban, so that American air travelers are not disconnected from the rest of the world without justification.

Carl Biersack is the executive director of the Inflight Passenger Communications Coalition (IPCC), a non-profit coalition dedicated to improving passenger connectivity in the United States. For more information, go to www.passengercommunications.org.

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