

Aviation Industry To Seek Funds For Air Cargo Screening

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Beginning Sunday, half of all cargo shipped on passenger airplanes in the United States will be screened for weapons of mass destruction as required by a 2007 law, a security practice that government and industry officials say should be implemented smoothly.

But meeting another mandate, which takes effect next year, that requires all cargo carried on passenger planes to be screened is proving to be a major challenge that might require an infusion of funding from Congress, according to industry officials.

Despite initial pushback by the Transportation Security Administration and the aviation industry against Congress when it considered screening requirements, shipments of air cargo will not be disrupted when the first mandate goes into effect Feb. 1.

"The 50 percent [mandate] is not going to be a hardship for the industry," said Brandon Fried, executive director of the **Airforwarders Association**, the main trade group for members of a \$17 billion industry, who move items ranging from critical medical supplies to business wares by commercial airline.

TSA already has been requiring airlines using narrow-body planes, or those with only one aisle, to ensure that cargo is screened before flights since October.

But that is "the low-hanging fruit," Fried said in an interview.

He said the biggest challenge will be ensuring that 100 percent of cargo shipped on wide-body planes is screened by August 2010, which is the second mandate under a massive 2007 homeland security law.

The aviation industry estimates that as much as \$4 billion will be needed over 10 years to cover the costs of the 100-percent mandate.

Fried said his group plans to seek funding in the FY10 Homeland Security appropriations bill. But the association does not yet have an estimate for how much it will seek.

The government is giving air carriers and cargo shippers several options to ensure that cargo is screened, according to TSA spokeswoman Ann Davis. They include using explosives detection systems, bomb-sniffing dogs and privately operated cargo screening facilities.

To date, TSA has worked with industry to establish facilities in 18 cities across the country where cargo can be screened, Davis said.

She added that a certain percentage of cargo shipped on wide-body planes is already required to be screened, although the figure is not made public.

Additionally, TSA has established a program called "Known Shipper" under which companies with good track records are trusted, Davis said. But Congress indicated in the 2007 law that the Known Shipper program could not be, in and of itself, a valid screening method.

Air carriers and cargo shippers say one of the biggest problems in meeting the August 2010 mandate is screening palletized cargo, or cargo that is not shipped in small or individual packages.

"This is a burden on industry," said Asa Hutchinson, chairman of the Safe Commerce Coalition, which advocates on behalf of industry.

He said the exact cost of the 2010 mandate is hard to predict because it could include higher consumer prices, flight delays or lost business opportunities. And he also questioned how foreign governments and foreign air carriers will react to the mandate.

Hutchinson, who served as the first Homeland Security undersecretary for border and transportation security, did not express optimism that the government would "pick up the burden." But he called the 100 percent cargo screening mandate "a burden being placed on an industry that is struggling."