

First Independent Cargo Screener Approved At Los Angeles

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The Transportation Security Administration has certified Mercury Air Cargo, a tenant at Los Angeles Airport, as the U.S.'s first independent cargo screening facility to comply with new freight security requirements, effective Feb. 1.

Mercury is likely to serve small and independent freight forwarders that have elected not to invest in the screening technology required to comply with congressionally mandated security goals, says David Herbst, executive VP. With its 200,000-square-foot facility on the airport property, Mercury accepts unscreened cargo from freight forwarders or indirect air carriers, screens it in a secure environment and conveys the freight directly to aircraft.

TSA has certified 129 cargo screening operations, largely forwarders, says Brandon Fried, executive director of the **airforwarders association**. The certification is part of the agency's Certified Cargo Screening Program launched after Congress passed the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007. The law requires that half the freight in bellies of U.S. passenger aircraft as of Feb. 1 must be screened by TSA-approved technologies and procedures. All cargo on passenger aircraft must be screened by 2010. The security level must be commensurate with passenger checked baggage.

Cost estimates for the expanded TSA effort over a 10-year span have run to about \$4 billion, a figure often heard in industry, says Fried. Though the law lays the chief responsibility for screening on the airlines, TSA has urged all parties in the cargo sector — shippers, forwarders, indirect air carriers and consolidators — to participate by screening cargo before it gets to the airplane. The cargo system comprises 10,000 facilities operated by 3,800 forwarders. Shippers and other participants can become certified cargo security facilities if they meet TSA requirements.

“We don't believe that the impact for 50% screening is going to be that big,” says Cindy Allen, who headed the security task force for the National Customs Brokers & Forwarders Association of America. The 50% goal has been met, she says, by the TSA overseeing checks of cargo going aboard narrowbody aircraft, which was required last year, and the screening programs in place at the 18 metropolitan airports.

Allen's concern is focused on small and medium-size independent forwarders and indirect air carriers that are finding it difficult to finance purchase of security equipment and to bear the cost of training programs. The 850-member NCBFAA has supported a

“car wash” approach that would allow operators to form a cooperative that would provide screening.

“We remain cautiously optimistic but extremely concerned about the remaining 50%,” says Fried. “Now we focus on widebody aircraft, the pallets and containers and flights internationally. And there’s still no equipment certified to screen multi-commodity pallets and containers so we’re going to run into some issues.” The real concern, he says, is the obligation to examine cargo by piece if technology is not available.