



## **U.S. Lacks Technology to Meet Air Cargo Screening Goal**

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WASHINGTON -- The U.S. Transportation Security Administration is not on pace to meet a congressional mandate to ensure that all cargo transported on passenger planes is screened for weapons of mass destruction, government officials said yesterday (see [GSN](#), Jan. 30).

That prompted at least one key lawmaker to say Congress might have to take new steps to help the agency reach that goal instead of changing the August 2010 deadline.

House Homeland Security Transportation Security Subcommittee Chairwoman Sheila Jackson Lee (D-Texas) and senior Republican committee member Charles Dent (Pa.) agreed that the agency should meet the air cargo mandates that Democrats placed in a 2007 bill, which was intended to implement unfulfilled recommendations of the Sept. 11 commission.

The bill, which then-President George W. Bush signed into law, set the 2010 deadline for the agency to ensure all cargo carried aboard passenger aircraft is screened. Lawmakers say the mandate applies to aircraft originating in this country and aircraft coming into the United States from abroad.

The Transportation Security Administration does not expect to meet the requirement for inbound aircraft, Ed Kelly, the agency's manager for air cargo, told the subcommittee during a hearing.

"One of the challenges we face is the limitations of the currently available technology -- specifically, the effectiveness of existing technology for detecting explosives in cargo, its operational feasibility, and its general availability for deployment to the industry to meet the mandate of the 9/11 Act," Kelly said in written testimony.

"TSA has the legal authority to require that a given percentage of inbound cargo be screened before it reaches the United States," he added. "Given the physical limitations of many airports, however, requiring U.S. and foreign air carriers to screen 100 percent of

inbound cargo by a given date would significantly impede the flow of commerce into the United States."

Jackson Lee said after the hearing she is not ready to give up on the 2010 deadline or to seek legislation that would push back the date. She said the subcommittee has time to craft legislation to help the agency.

"The push back, I think, should be our last resort," she said.

Congress could help by providing more funding, expediting the procurement of screening technology and directing the agency to use transportation security officers to help screen cargo, Jackson Lee said.

She added that she plans to examine what kind of cooperation the agency is getting from airlines to meet the mandate.

Tje Homeland Security Department has the power to give relief to its branch, said a congressional aide. The aide said the department has the authority to exempt cargo on inbound planes from the screening mandate.

The Sept. 11 bill also required the Transportation Security Administration to ensure that 50 percent of cargo being shipped on passenger planes is screened beginning on Feb. 3. To meet that mandate, the agency now requires air carriers in the United States to screen cargo put on narrow-body airplanes -- those with only one aisle.

However, the ability to meet even that deadline is under dispute. The agency has not been able to produce data to verify the claim, said Stephen Lord, homeland security and justice issues director at the Government Accountability Office.

Kelly testified that he believes the mandate is being met. The agency is collecting screening data from the airlines and will give Congress a report in mid April to prove the 50 percent mandate is being met, he said.

"I would argue that we didn't miss the deadline," he said. "We missed the ability to report on it."