



Public Broadcasting for the Mid-South



The 100 Percent Cargo Screening Conundrum

Nicole Erwin

After the September 11th terrorist attacks eight years ago, lawmakers mandated a host of new laws to try to make the country safer. One of the changes is a Congressional requirement to screen all air cargo beginning next year. As the deadline approaches, the industry is wondering if it can get it done in time. WKNO's Nicole Erwin reports.

Before the 9-11 attacks, there was virtually no cargo screening in the United States. But since, the Department of Homeland Security has phased in changes. As of last month, air cargo carriers are required to scan half their shipments --- and by next year, all of it must be screened.

More than 7 billion pounds of cargo is moved on passenger planes a year and under the current 9/11 mandate all 7 billion pounds of that cargo would be required to pass through some form of surveillance at least once. Steve Alterman is the president of the Cargo Airline Association, he says as of right now attempting to fulfill this mandate would inevitably bankrupt the industry.

"People pay all cargo airlines, especially the FedEx and UPS of the world to get a packet from point A to point B in a time definite manner. If we had to do 100 percent screening of every package as opposed to everything that could carry a human being we could never guarantee that," said Alterman.

With that guarantee would come a 100 percent refund. Alterman says there isn't enough technology, man power or dog power even to do the job that Congress is asking by August 2010.

When Congress implemented the mandate in 2007 no where did they include funding for the process. It was assumed the air cargo industry could handle the responsibility alone. Brandon Fried is the Executive Director of the Air Forwarders Association, he says it is the funding that is holding the industry back from reaching the requirements.

"You know we can get this job done. But when you are depending on technology that cost between 50 thousand dollars and 500 thousand dollars per air forwarders facility that's pretty expensive stuff," Fried said.

But even if the funding were there to buy the scanning equipment...there still wouldn't be anything to purchase, or anything that meets the Transportation Security Administration's requirements that is...

"A lot of the technology that they are supposedly using overseas to scan pallets and containers has what we call high false positive rates or false alarm rates that have to be rectified. My understanding is that they can exceed 18 percent. And so that obviously slows down the movement of cargo itself, and TSA standards are pretty high and until they meet the requirements of the administration they are not going to certify them for usage here in the United States," Fried said.

During a recent Department of Homeland Security meeting legislators asked the cargo industry to verify whether or not they had indeed met the February mandate. TSA claimed they had but could not verify the statement with data. TSA told the committee it would have data documenting the statement by mid April. The Committee agreed.

FedEx and UPS are both tight lipped in regards to the processes they have taken in order to comply with the mandate. Apparently it is taboo for any air cargo organization to discuss security. However, both gave an anecdotal response that they have complied with TSA regulations.

Mississippi Congressman Bennie Thompson, who also chairs the House Homeland Security Committee, says the 2010 deadline will not be postponed unless TSA explains why it should.

Brandon Fried with the Air Forwarders Association says the future of cargo screening lies with dogs.

It's the multiple commodity containers or large pallets the industry is having difficulty scanning. The smaller freight or narrow bellied, according to the industry, is already at the 100 percent screening requirement.