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TSA spreads the task of scanning belly cargo

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It's taken far longer than anyone wanted, but the Transportation Security Administration has devised what seems to be a workable plan for screening the 12 million pounds of air cargo that fly daily on passenger aircraft.

The Certified Cargo Screening Program is designed to spread the task of cargo screening among selected secure facilities operated by cargo intermediaries. TSA officials believe the program will prevent airport chokepoints that can disrupt the supply chain, while meeting a congressional deadline to screen 50 percent of the cargo moving aboard passenger aircraft by February 2009, and 100 percent by August 2010.

The cargo-screening program is being tested at the 18 U.S. airports that account for some two-thirds of the total airfreight volume. A dozen large air forwarding companies screen and certify cargo off-airport, and deliver it to the airlines ready for loading. John Sammon, TSA assistant administrator in charge of the program, said the TSA previously focused on plans to screen cargo the same way as passengers' luggage.

"The reason this never went anywhere is that people were trying to design systems and procedures and doing it at the airport. That is just a non-starter," Sammon said.

Sammon said that for the TSA to screen cargo at airports would require hundreds of millions in facility construction and the hiring of as many as 9,000 new TSA employees, and Congress has not been willing to foot the bill. Allowing the private sector to do the job under TSA supervision gives airlines and intermediaries options.

"We want to create flexibility, the proper time and place to have cargo screened," Sammon said. "We believe the market will sort it out place by place."

"I think the approach is a sound one. The problem is going to be how they implement it," said Cathleen A. Berrick, director of homeland security and justice issues for the Government Accountability Office. Chain of custody is a major unresolved problem, Berrick said.

The TSA also is strapped by a lack of money, said Brandon Fried, president of the **Airforwarders Association**. The TSA intended to reimburse companies that buy cargo-screening equipment, but the funding was clipped out of the 2009 budget. The agency also lacks money for testing technology.