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Companies take on mammoth screening duty

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By **Thomas Frank**, USA TODAY

DULLES, Va. — Tim Holdaway's job seems simple: send a truck to pick up shipments of computers and TVs from manufacturers and get the boxes to an airport.

Starting in the next year, Holdaway and companies like his, Cavalier Logistics, will take on a task that could change aviation security and international commerce.

In one of the biggest and costliest expansions of aviation security since 9/11, hundreds of companies such as Cavalier are gearing up to screen tens of millions of boxes of merchandise before those boxes are loaded onto U.S. passenger airplanes to be carried each year to retailers and others around the world.

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Democrats in Congress ordered the screening last year as a way to stop terrorists from using a cargo shipment to blow up a passenger plane. Cargo is not required to be screened before it is loaded with luggage under a passenger cabin.

A 2007 law requires cargo on passenger planes to be screened. The system is being phased in — by 2010, all cargo on passenger planes must be screened. That could have far-reaching effects.

Congressional researchers estimate the screening equipment and personnel will cost \$3.75 billion over 10 years. Transportation expert Brandon Fried says screening could take so long that shipments would be delayed and "factories could shut down." Security consultant Douglas Laird questions whether companies that specialize in trucking freight can secure aviation. He calls the entire process "folly."

"You're spending a lot of money for not achieving much," says Laird, former security chief at Northwest Airlines.

Working with airlines, manufacturers and transport companies, the Transportation Security Administration is developing a system to do what was once thought impossible — screen more than 600,000 boxes of cargo a day for bombs.

Unlike the 2 million daily airline passengers and their 1.5 million pieces of luggage, cargo will not be screened by the TSA at airports. That's because cargo often arrives at airports packed in aluminum crates the size of a small car, and there isn't time to take apart the crates so each box holding one computer or TV set can be screened individually.

The TSA's solution: Have the screening done by people who pack the crates.

"We want the supply chain, before they assemble a load, to take individual boxes and screen them," TSA assistant administrator John Sammon says.

The middlemen

The plan puts the spotlight — and financial pressure — on companies such as Cavalier, which would buy and operate bomb-detection machines.

"From a cost standpoint, it's substantial," says Holdaway, Cavalier's president. He's standing in Cavalier's

60,000-square-foot warehouse near Washington Dulles International Airport as the beeping whine of a forklift echoes off the concrete floor.

Cavalier has 200 employees and seven warehouses — most near a major U.S. airport. It functions as a middleman for companies that want goods shipped long distances but don't want to arrange the transport. It's one of 4,000 so-called "airforwarders" that handle 80% of cargo loaded on passenger planes.

Cavalier truck drivers bring merchandise to a warehouse. Laborers pack the boxes into big containers. Booking agents line up flights to take cargo around the world. Truckers drive to an airport. "We warehouse, ship, consolidate and store," Holdaway says.

Laird wonders whether the new system can keep bombs off planes.

"When the screening is dispersed to so many locations, how are you going to ensure that the screeners at these facilities meet the same qualifications as the TSA screeners at airports?" Laird says. "Who's going to ensure that everything is done properly?"

Laird also questions whether a terrorist would plant a bomb in a cargo package because the package might end up in an all-cargo plane flown by a company such as FedEx.

Rep. Ed Markey, D-Mass., who led a four-year fight to require cargo screening, worries about how boxes that have been screened will remain secure while being driven to an airport.

Training and inspections

Sammon of the TSA says screeners working for airforwarders will get similar training to TSA airport screeners and will be monitored by agency inspectors who will make regular unannounced visits. The TSA is developing seals for screened boxes that indicate tampering.

Sammon has signed up 20 airforwarders near major airports such as Chicago O'Hare to test a screening system in a few months.

Airforwarders will not be required to screen cargo they take to passenger planes. They are free to do no screening. Sammon says many will do the screening because it will help business. Airlines will have to screen cargo they receive that has not been checked.

That could "cause massive bottlenecks, because airlines don't have the manpower, equipment or real estate" to do extensive screening, says Brandon Fried, executive director of the Airforwarders Association. "You're going to have backlogs and products that don't make it to market on time, or store shelves that go empty. Factories could shut down because they can't get inventory parts."

Michele Siano, compliance officer for Cavalier, says TSA officials have told her cargo packages might have to wait four days at an airport if her company does not screen them. "There is no option for us" but to screen packages, Siano says.