

TSA Focuses on Small Aircraft to Meet Cargo Goal

by Mickey McCarter
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Narrow-body aircraft to meet 100 percent screening by October in effort to screen 50 percent of all passenger cargo by February 2009

An official from the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) assured a House Homeland Security subcommittee that his agency is on track to meet a congressionally mandated target of screening 50 percent of all passenger air cargo by February 2009, but elements of TSA's strategy for doing so drew protests from air cargo representatives Tuesday.

TSA must screen 100 percent of air cargo on passenger aircraft by August 2010 under the Implementing Recommendations of the 9/11 Commission Act of 2007 (PL 110-53). TSA Assistant Administrator John Sammon told the House panel that TSA will depend heavily on stakeholders such as US-based shippers, freight forwarders and passenger air carriers to screen an estimated 12 million pounds of passenger aircraft cargo daily.

"TSA is committed to meeting the 9/11 Act's goals. And, when we meet the 50 percent goal, the vast majority of flights, carrying more than three-quarters of all passengers, will in fact be screened at the 100 percent level," Sammon said in his testimony.

To achieve this, TSA is requiring about 95 percent of domestic passenger flights, those on "narrow-body planes," to implement 100 percent screening of cargo by October 2008. These flights carry about 25 percent of all cargo carried on passenger aircraft, Sammon said.

By contrast, "wide-body" aircraft carry cargo that is often prepackaged on large pallets, posing screening challenges that TSA is not fully able to overcome at present, Sammon said. The agency is depending on increased investments in screening technologies to meet that goal in the future.

To achieve screening on the narrow-body aircraft, TSA has trained 450 canine teams, operated by local law enforcement agencies, to screen cargo. TSA also has employed 430 air cargo transportation security inspectors nationwide with another 20 joining their ranks within the next few months. These inspectors conduct compliance reviews to ensure the fulfillment of TSA screening requirements.

Screening cargo pallets in wide-body or large aircraft may require advancements in technology, however, Sammon warned.

"Under current industry practice, a large percentage of cargo that will be placed aboard passenger aircraft, particularly wide-body aircraft, is tendered at the airport in a consolidated state, i.e., it has already been packaged on large pallets for transportation," he testified. "Without the development of effective technology for dealing with cargo tendered in this manner, screening would require significant costly reengineering of existing packaging and shipping processes."

The challenge of screening large pallets might be better met by requiring air carriers or cargo facilities earlier in the transportation chain to screen the cargo or by using canine teams, suggested Explosives Director John Tuttle of the Science and Technology (S&T) Directorate at the Department of Homeland Security.

Some technological solutions currently exist for monitoring passenger air cargo, including heartbeat monitors and carbon dioxide sensors for the detection of any people hiding in cargo, Tuttle added.

In the short term, S&T hopes to optimize explosive detection systems (EDS) to screen bulk cargo, but development of advanced technologies to screen large cargo pallets could take three to five years, Tuttle stated.

Challenges and Objections

TSA has elected to involve air cargo carriers and handlers in the screening process through its Certified Cargo Screening Program (CCSP). However, it has not yet told stakeholders which technologies it will certify for use under CCSP, Cathleen Berrick, director Homeland Security and Justice Issues at the Government Accountability Office (GAO), told Congress.

"TSA has reported that there are several challenges that must be overcome to effectively implement any of these technologies, including the nature, type, and size of cargo to be screened and the location of air cargo facilities. In addition, the air cargo industry voiced concern about the costs associated with purchasing the screening equipment," Berrick testified.

Airlines are making purchases of equipment to meet the screening mandate, and so they are particularly anxious to know which products qualify for screening under CCSP, John Meenan, executive vice president of the Air Transport Association, said.

"[W]e need the TSA to provide a 'Qualified Products List' specifying exactly what equipment--already purchased or currently available for purchase--is approved by the TSA for screening cargo," Meenan said. "Because there is no certified technology to efficiently screen cargo, airlines remain hesitant to purchase technology absent a qualified list and the specific operational protocols, which help determine the number of units necessary."

Meenan also called the TSA requirement to screen cargo on 100 percent of narrow-body aircraft by October "an unnecessary mandate," made more difficult by a lack of TSA-approved technologies and procedures.

Cindy Allen of the National Customs Broker and Forwarders Association of America echoed concerns from industry that compliance with CCSP has become an "unfunded mandate."

"[T]he Certified Cargo Screening Program involves large capital outlays for screening equipment, costs which are well beyond the means of most businesses," Allen declared. "Equipment that is used for screening of air cargo must be far more substantial than that required for screening passenger baggage. The size and complexity of packaging and palletizing requires greater sophistication and capacity--and hence far greater cost."

Industry stakeholders estimate each cargo facility must spend \$150,000 to \$500,000 to meet CCSP requirements.