



Air cargo security on Congress' radar screen again
By Jeff Berman, Senior Editor -- 3/1/2007

WASHINGTON—The U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation introduced legislation last month calling for the screening of all cargo on passenger airplanes within three years. According to the committee, the objective of the bill's cargo-screening provision is to strike a balance between ensuring that all cargo moving on passenger aircraft is secure and ensuring the efficient movement of commerce.

The cargo-screening requirements in S. 509, the Aviation Security Improvement Act, are similar to those in H.R. 1, Implementing the 9/11 Commission Recommendations Act of 2007, passed by the House of Representatives in January. That bill called for 100 percent inspection of cargo on passenger airlines by 2009.

Under the provisions of S. 509, the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) would be charged with establishing a system to screen all cargo transported on passenger aircraft operated by domestic or foreign air carriers. The system would be required to deploy equipment, technology, personnel, and other methods to provide a level of security that, at minimum, equals security levels for passengers' checked baggage.

Although no one disputes the bill's good intentions or the need to keep airborne cargo safe, some industry experts and shippers believe the proposal may ultimately do more harm than good by slowing down supply chains and disrupting commerce.

"Our main concern is that we want to make sure we have a good aviation cargo-security policy while at the same time making sure that the flow of commerce is not slowed down," said Brandon Fried, executive director of the Airforwarders Association in Alexandria, Va.

A concern for Fried's group is the difference between the physical-inspection requirement in H.R. 1 and the risk-based screening mandated in S. 509.

"You hear the rhetoric on Capitol Hill, and it seems to imply they are the same thing," said Fried. "But to us, the screening in the Senate bill would result in a different type of policy—one that air forwarders believe would enhance the risk-based approach and give the TSA the necessary flexibility to achieve greater security without bringing commerce to a halt. A risk-based method would expedite cargo flow, so if it's obvious something does not have to be searched, time does not have to be wasted doing that," he explains.

Fried added that the bill's three-year timeline for implementing cargo screening has the potential to slow down the flow of just-in-time goods (such as medical supplies, plants and flowers, and assembly-line items and parts) because there currently are no IT-based screening tools or systems in place that have been vetted and certified by the TSA.

Chris Coppersmith, president and CEO of Target Logistics, an airfreight forwarder and logistics-service provider in Carson, Calif., agreed with Fried that a risk-based, multi-layered approach would be more effective than 100 percent inspection. But that system is not without its questions, too, he added.

Among Coppersmith's questions are whether or not a three-year timeline is realistic, how the screening system would be funded, and what is the bill's specific definition of screening.

"If we can get answers to these things, we're happy to be involved in the discussion," said Coppersmith. "The fragility of airfreight can be affected by anything that delays the [shipping] process for any significant period of time. And it changes the dynamic of expedited freight, which we are dependent on as a country for things like same-day and overnight delivery of emergency supplies and materials, which has been cut down to hours as a result of our expedited systems."

Like Coppersmith, Leo Roozen has plenty of questions. The president of Washington Bulb Company, a Mt. Vernon, Wash., provider of flower bulbs and cut flowers, worries that physical inspection or screening is likely to damage his fragile products and will negatively affect his business.

"Our boxes that are shipped are taped, strapped, and stapled shut for various reasons," said Roozen. "[This legislation] could compromise the quality of those boxes. How will they get refastened? It is not like a suitcase that can be zipped back up. Will these boxes be repacked after they get inspected? ... Logistically it [may] be impossible. There are many questions about how this will be implemented and done. It is fine to say 'here is what we are going to do,' but is it even possible?"

S.509 originally was slated for debate in late February but was pushed back to March. At press time, however, no further details regarding its status were available. Watch for updates on this story at www.logisticsmgmt.com.