

Shippers' Screening Alarm

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The idea of physically screening all cargo flying in passenger planes hasn't gotten off the ground despite three years of pushing by proponents in Congress.

But that hasn't stopped Rep. Edward Markey, D-Mass., from trying to get shippers and retailers from keeping up a steady drumbeat against physical screening requirements they say would be impractical and unnecessary.

"We're scared because it means bad things for the United States if it happens," Airforwarders Association Executive Director Brandon Fried said of a Markey's plan to require 100 percent scanning of airplane belly cargo.

"In the absence of adequate technology to perform the inspection tasks, such legislation would be foolish and bring air freight commerce to a stop," said Fried. "So we are throwing lots of time, energy and resources behind its defeat."

Last week, amendments Markey prepared requiring 100 percent physical inspection of maritime and air cargo didn't make it into the 2007 Department of Homeland Security spending bill when Markey failed to offer them up for a vote.

That followed an attempt this spring by Markey and other Democrats to amend the House port security bill to require 100 percent screening of maritime containers entering the United States. Shippers banded together to successfully fight that effort.

But Markey isn't giving up and shippers say they can't become complacent.

With three years of persistence on Markey's part as well as a contentious port security debate this year that elevated the public awareness of cargo security, "We're taking it very seriously," Fried said.

And well they should, said Retail Industry Leaders Association Senior Vice President of Federal and State Government Affairs Paul Kelly. "Any time you have a tight election, an issue like that becomes attractive for political purposes," Kelly said. "I don't blame them for being on guard and on alert. It's a bread and butter issue for them. And they ought to be operating as if there's a risk of it passing."

Although RILA's members, who are large retailers, care most about the maritime mode, Kelly said RILA decided to fight the air cargo scanning effort because it sees the two efforts as closely linked.

The National Retail Federation also opposed Markey last week. "American retailers support security initiatives to safeguard the nation from the introduction of dangerous weapons and persons while also protecting retailers' supply chains and brand names," NRF Senior Vice President for Government Relations Steve Pfister said in a letter to lawmakers.

"However, requiring 100 percent inspection of U.S.-bound air and sea cargo is currently operationally infeasible, technically unreliable and would cause unacceptably high economic costs and disruptions to the nation's commerce while offering no real improvement in the nation's cargo security system."

But, the issue persists and not just with Markey. Sen. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., floated an amendment to set a 100 percent sea container-scanning requirement.

"I think it'll be with us for a while," said National Industrial Transportation League Executive Vice President Peter Gatti.

Markey said he noticed the increased lobbying against his screening amendments this year. "The airline and cargo industries have intensified their lobbying efforts against the cargo amendment, and the Republican majority in Congress has repeatedly sided with industry against urgently needed security upgrades," Markey said. "I am hopeful that if we can't pass anything before November, that a new Congress will have a renewed sense of responsibility to dramatically and immediately increase cargo scanning.

"It is difficult for the Republican-controlled Congress and the Bush administration to justify their opposition to scanning all the cargo on passenger planes when those who are most familiar with the deadly consequences of aviation security loopholes - the pilots, flight attendants and families of September 11 victims - so strongly support a 100 percent scanning policy," Markey said.

Although Markey is consistently able to garner sizeable support from his fellow Democrats, there are few lobbyists supporting him on Capitol Hill who could win over the opposition. Even companies that make cargo-screening equipment are hesitant to appear too enthusiastic lest they alienate their corporate customers.

"If inspection gets to be known as something that slows things down, then that would be bad for our industry," said Rapiscan Systems Vice President of Government Affairs Peter Kant, whose company is working on an air cargo container scanning machine the Transportation Security Administration is set to test at Houston's airport.

"We want it to be smart and directed and risk-based inspection. And Markey at least draws attention to the issue."