FAA Moving Toward Easing Electronic Device Use

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Relief may be on the way for airline passengers who can't bear to be separated even briefly from their personal electronic devices. The government is moving toward allowing gate-to-gate use of music players, tablets, laptops, smartphones and other gadgets, although it may take a few months.

Restrictions on cellphone calls and Internet use and transmission are not expected to be changed.

An industry-labor advisory committee was supposed to make recommendations next month to the Federal Aviation Administration on easing restrictions on using electronic devices during takeoffs and landings. But the agency said in a statement Friday the deadline has been extended to September because committee members asked for extra time to finish assessing whether it's safe to lift restrictions.

"The FAA recognizes consumers are intensely interested in the use of personal electronics aboard aircraft; that is why we tasked a government-industry group to examine the safety issues and the feasibility of changing the current restrictions," the statement said.

The agency is under public and political pressure to ease the restrictions as more people bring their devices with them when they fly in order to read e-books, listen to music, watch videos, and get work done.

Technically, the FAA doesn't bar use of electronic devices when aircraft are below 10,000 feet. But under FAA rules, airlines that want to let passengers use the devices are faced with a practical impossibility — they would have to show that they've tested every type and make of device passengers would use to ensure there is no electromagnetic interference with aircraft radios and electrical and electronic systems.

As a result, U.S. airlines simply bar all electric device use below 10,000 feet. Airline accidents are most likely to occur during takeoffs, landings and taxiing.

Using cellphones to make calls on planes is regulated by the Federal Communications Commission. There is concern that making calls from fast-flying planes might strain cellular systems, interfering with service on the ground. There is also the potential annoyance factor — whether passengers will be unhappy if they have to listen to other passengers yakking on the phone.

The Wall Street Journal reported Friday that a draft report by the advisory committee indicates its 28 members have reached a consensus that at least some of the current restrictions should be eased.

A member of the committee told The Associated Press that while the draft report is an attempt to reach consensus, no formal agreement has yet been reached. The member was not authorized to discuss the committee's private deliberations and requested anonymity.

There are also still safety concerns, the member said. The electrical interference generated by today's devices is much lower than those of a decade ago, but many more passengers today are carrying electronics.

Any plan to allow gate-to-gate electronic use would also come with certification processes for new and existing aircraft to ensure that they are built or modified to mitigate those risks. Steps to be taken could include ensuring that all navigational antennas are angled away from the plane's doors and windows. Planes that are already certified for Wi-Fi would probably be more easily certified.

Although the restrictions have been broadly criticized as unnecessary, committee members saw value in them.

One of the considerations being weighed is whether some heavier devices like laptops should continue to be restricted because they might become dangerous projectiles, hurting other passengers during a crash, the committee member said. There is less concern about tablets and other lighter devices.

FAA officials would still have the final say. An official familiar with FAA's efforts on the issue said agency officials would like to find a way to allow passengers to use electronic devices during takeoffs and landings the same way they're already allowed to use them when planes are cruising above 10,000 feet. The official requested anonymity because he wasn't authorized to speak by name.

FAA Administrator Michael Huerta told a Senate panel in April that he convened the advisory committee in the hope of working out changes to the restrictions.

"It's good to see the FAA may be on the verge of acknowledging what the traveling public has suspected for years — that current rules are arbitrary and lack real justification," Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., one of Congress' more outspoken critics of the restrictions, said in a statement. She contends that unless scientific evidence can be presented to justify the restrictions, they should be lifted.

Edward Pizzarello, the co-founder of frequent flier discussion site MilePoint, says

lifting the restriction is "long overdue."

"I actually feel like this regulation has been toughest on flight attendants. Nobody wants to shut off their phone, and the flight attendants are always left to be the bad guys and gals," said Pizzarello, 38, of Leesburg, Va.

Actor Alec Baldwin became the face of passenger frustration with the restrictions in 2011 when he was kicked off a New York-bound flight in Los Angeles for refusing to turn off his cellphone. Baldwin later issued an apology to fellow American Airlines passengers who were delayed, but mocked the flight attendant on Twitter.

"I just hope they do the sensible thing and don't allow people to talk on their cellphones during flight," said Pizzarello, who flies 150,000 to 200,000 miles a year. "There are plenty of people that don't have the social skills necessary to make a phone call on a plane without annoying the people around them. Some things are better left alone."

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Mayerowitz reported from New York.

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