# If Gov't Backs In-Flight Calls, Will the Airlines?

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New York (AP) — The Federal Communications Commission might be ready to permit cellphone calls in flight. But what about the airlines?

Old concerns about electronics being a danger to airplane navigation have been debunked. And airlines could make some extra cash charging passengers to call a loved one from 35,000 feet. But that extra money might not be worth the backlash from fliers who view overly chatty neighbors as another inconvenience to go along with smaller seats and stuffed overhead bins.

"Common courtesy goes out the window when people step in that metal tube," says James Patrick II, a frequent flier from Newnan, Ga. "You think the debates and fistfights over reclining the seat back was bad. Wait until guys start slugging it out over someone talking too loud on the phone."

That's one of the reasons the country's largest flight attendant union has come out against allowing calls in flight. The FCC is proposing to lift an existing ban, and airlines would have to decide whether to let passengers make calls. The ban would remain in effect during takeoff and landing.

Delta Air Lines is the only major airline to explicitly state that voice calls won't be allowed on its flights, even if the FCC allows it. Delta says years of feedback from customers show "the overwhelming sentiment" is to continue prohibiting calls.

Other airlines aren't as firm.

United Airlines says that if the FCC changes its rules, "we will study it along with feedback from customers and crews." American Airlines has offered a similar approach. So has JetBlue, which says it would "welcome the opportunity to explore" voice calls but "would prioritize making the cabin comfortable and welcoming for

all."

Confused yet?

Well, to complicate matters even more, the airlines actually don't need to wait for the FCC. Yes, the government would need to remove the restriction for you to make normal calls in flight. But there are already plenty of ways to make calls legally over airline Wi-Fi networks, while keeping your phone in "airplane mode." The airlines just choose to block such calls.

Just as many schools and workplaces block access to pornography websites, airlines use similar filters to block access to Skype and other Internet calling services.

Gogo Inc., which provides Internet access on American, Alaska Airlines, Delta, United, US Airways and Virgin America flights, recently announced a new service for passengers to send and receive text messages or make phone calls using Wi-Fi.

A U.S. airline Gogo wouldn't name will launch the service early next year with only text-messaging capabilities.

"We know that the talk portion for commercial aviation is not really something airlines or their passengers want," Gogo spokesman Steve Nolan says.

The talk function was designed for private jets and international airlines. Most Middle East airlines and a few in Asia and Europe already allow voice calls on planes.

Gogo's chief competitor, Global Eagle Entertainment Inc.'s Row 44, will debut gate-to-gate text service for $2 a flight on select Southwest Airlines aircraft Monday.

Tom Wheeler, who became the FCC's chairman three weeks ago, issued a statement Thursday saying that "modern technologies can deliver mobile services in the air safely and reliably and the time is right to review our outdated and restrictive rules." Travelers protested to the agency and on social media. On a White House website, a petition opposing the FCC's move attracted more than 2,000 signatures by Saturday afternoon.

Wheeler backed off Friday. He clarified that "airlines are best positioned" to make decisions about what's in the interests of passengers. The FCC's role should just be to decide what is safe or not, and cellphone calls are safe, he said.

"We understand that many passengers would prefer that voice calls not be made on airplanes," Wheeler said. "I feel that way myself."

Wheeler declined to speak with The Associated Press. Any change would likely take at least a year to take effect.

Airline consultant Robert Mann says airlines have been using the FCC as an excuse not to allow cellphone use. He believes the agency wants to get itself out of the

equation.

Airlines "ought to own up to what the real issues are," Mann says. "They're not technology. They're not regulatory. It's a business decision."

The Federal Aviation Administration recently lifted its ban on personal electronic devices, such as iPads and Kindles, under 10,000 feet. But the FCC's announcement that it would discuss its phone prohibition at its Dec. 12 meeting came as a surprise.

"I was not aware this was anywhere near the front burner. I didn't even know it was on the stove at the commission," says Harry Cole, a communications regulations lawyer at Fletcher, Heald and Hildreth in Arlington, Va.

Angela Giancarlo, a former FCC official and now a partner at law firm Mayer Brown, says the proposal was in the works before Wheeler became chairman. She suspects that the FCC expected the proposal would be greeted favorably because it could allow passengers to remain connected.

The FCC banned calls in flight more than two decades ago because of concern they could interfere with multiple cell towers on the ground as planes fly at hundreds of miles per hour. Since then, there has been new technology that can be installed directly on planes. Cellphones in flight would connect to those airborne systems rather than the towers on the ground, eliminating the interference problem. The

FCC notes that such systems have been deployed elsewhere around the world without problems.

If phone calls are eventually allowed on planes — whether through Wi-Fi or traditional means — a company still has to install that equipment on aircraft. That company, in partnership with the airline, would likely charge a fee, the way Gogo and Row 44 now charge for Wi-Fi service. Cell carriers probably wouldn't profit off such calls.

Amtrak and many local commuter railways have created quiet cars for those who don't want to be trapped next to a loud talker. It's easy to envision airlines offering "quiet rows," although there will probably be an extra fee to sit there.

Ultimately, the FCC is going to make its decision based on safety, not public opinion, says Harold Feld, a senior vice president at advocacy group Public Knowledge.

"The decision on this is going to be made on the basis of real engineering facts and not about whether people enjoy being away from cellphones or not," Feld says.

U.S. airlines have tried in-flight calls before. Some passengers will remember bulky satellite phones that rested on the back of seats. Few travelers paid for the expensive calls. Airlines eventually ripped out the phones in favor of another distraction: seatback TVs.

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With reports from AP Technology Writer Anick Jesdanun in New York and AP Business Writer Chris Rugaber in Washington.

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