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## *Airlines get a break on baggage screening*

In a concession to the airlines, federal transportation officials said Wednesday that new baggage screening rules won't require bags for being pulled off a connecting flight if the passenger fails to get on the plane.

Airline security experts warned that the decision leaves significant holes in the security system. Although the bags would be initially checked as required by the new rules that take effect Friday, they said the plan leaves aircraft vulnerable to bombs timed to explode on a connecting flight.

"It's a bit frightening," said Arnold Barnett, an MIT professor who specializes in aviation security and has consulted on baggage screening for the Federal Aviation Administration.

"This is really not great news for people flying out of Chicago," Barnett said. "If you consider O'Hare, you have loads of connecting passengers [ticketed] on those planes and really no assurance that there are not unaccompanied bags in the cargo hold."

Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta outlined the new baggage security regulations Wednesday, two days before the airlines must begin screening all checked baggage for explosives to meet the deadline imposed by Congress last year. Airlines will be required either to inspect luggage or to make sure that the passenger who checked the bag is on board the first flight segment of his itinerary, Mineta said. Airlines will be allowed to inspect bags through hand searches, bomb-sniffing dogs or equipment that can detect traces of explosives, he said.

House Democratic Leader Dick Gephardt of Missouri blasted the new security standards.

"This decision amounts to a narrow interpretation of the statute and flouts the intent of a law designed to fundamentally change the air safety rules of our country," Gephardt said.

Mineta was criticized in December when he initially said he doubted that airlines would be able to meet the deadline for improved baggage security. He later backed away from his comments and said his department would try to meet the congressional timetable.

He reinforced the pledge in Wednesday's speech on baggage security, saying, "We consider the law's tight deadlines as promises made to the

American people, and we will do everything humanly possible to meet these promises."

A senior Transportation Department official declined to explain the department's reasoning for not including connecting flights in the bag-matching requirement.

But airlines have expressed concern that the requirement would disrupt airport operations and add to costs if they were forced to pull luggage off flights when passengers missed close connections. Barnett said a 1997 study for the Transportation Department estimated the cost of a full bag-matching system at 40 cents per passenger per flight segment.

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