

Airlines Likely Won't Meet Jan. 18 Target to Bomb-Screen All Luggage

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WASHINGTON -- The government effort to begin bomb-screening all airline baggage on domestic flights by Jan. 18 is running into trouble.

Airline officials say the Department of Transportation still hasn't come up with rules for the screening. Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta has cited a huge shortage of people and equipment needed to meet the target. And makers of baggage-scanning machines say the government hasn't even developed procedures for buying more such equipment.

"We've got a million questions, and no one's got answers," one airline security official said. The bottom line: Airlines won't soon begin screening all 1.4 billion bags they handle each year.

Federal officials say that to a large extent, they will try to meet the letter of the law by requiring that checked bags be matched to passengers -- an alternative to baggage screening endorsed by Congress, but loathed by airlines and questioned by some authorities as to its effectiveness.

"We're going to use the flexibility of the law that was passed in order to attain that 60-day requirement [for bag screening], and that includes bag-match," Mr. Mineta said last week. Three weeks ago, Mr. Mineta said his agency probably wouldn't meet the deadline because of equipment and personnel shortages -- comments quickly retracted by the White House and the secretary's own aides amid sharp congressional criticism.

Matching bags to travelers would prevent a terrorist from planting a bomb on an airplane and walking away, but it wouldn't thwart suicide attacks. "Bag matching is nice, but we don't think that's going to be sufficient," said Los Angeles Mayor James Hahn, who is leading an aviation-security task force comprised of 24 big-city mayors.

What's more, big airlines say they'd have to cut flights because their operations would be slowed by the matching. "We can't do it with the schedule we have," said Continental Airlines Chairman and Chief Executive Gordon M. Bethune. "We might just have to say, 'No bags.'"

AMR Corp.'s CEO, Donald Carty, has predicted job losses and Delta Air Lines' chief, Leo Mullin, estimated annual revenue losses at his company of as much as \$3.5 billion if they are forced to match all bags. The Air Transport Association, the Washington-based trade group that represents the nation's major airlines, says bag matching would be disruptive and ineffective, except in "limited circumstances" and only when used with other screening methods.

Instead, airlines want flexibility to use several security methods. Under the Aviation and Transportation Security Act signed into law by President Bush last month, suitcases must be screened starting Jan. 18 by one of these techniques: scanned by sophisticated bomb detectors, sniffed by trained dogs, searched by hand or matched to boarding passengers. A fifth short-term option is to screen bags with "other means or technology" approved by the Transportation Department, but the law doesn't say what means this might entail.

By the end of next year, the law requires that sophisticated scanning machines, capable of detecting bombs and plastic explosives, be deployed at all airports to screen all checked baggage.

For years, all baggage on international flights has been matched with passengers, but only a small fraction of domestic luggage -- belonging to passengers identified by computer-profiling systems as potential risks -- was matched prior to Sept. 11. Since Sept. 11, the government has required airlines to search or screen the luggage of all domestic passengers flagged as potential risks, but matching has been discontinued.

Most major airlines already have the capability to match bags with passengers. But bag matching is easier with international flights because of the smaller number of flights involved and because of the longer check-in times required.

When passengers check in for international and domestic flights, a computer reservation system typically generates a random number for each bag tag. That number is associated with the passenger's name. On international flights, after the bags have been stored on the plane and all passengers have boarded, the numbers from the luggage tags are automatically cross-referenced with the list of boarded passengers to make sure anyone who has checked a bag is actually on the flight. But on domestic flights, this process isn't carried out for the vast majority of passengers.

"On a given day, a group of saboteurs could load up 12 different airplanes across the country with explosives, go home, and we would have a disaster which would virtually end the airline business for an indefinite period of time," Sen. Herbert Kohl, a Wisconsin Democrat, recently told top executives from four of the country's biggest carriers. "As long as that is possible, I think you all are taking a huge risk."

Already, some airlines are quietly exploring how to expand their bag-matching operations. Northwest Airlines has begun limited testing of a bag-matching system. A Northwest spokesman declined to say how many flights or airports are involved. Frontier Airlines Inc. and JetBlue Airways Corp. have begun matching bags to passengers on all flights, though with only 112 and 94 daily flights respectively, their experiences aren't viewed within the industry as good test cases.

Some experts who have studied bag-matching say the airline industry has exaggerated its costs. A two-week study conducted for the Federal Aviation Administration in 1997 found that the procedure delayed departures by one minute on average and estimated it would increase the

industry's costs by about 40 cents a passenger, with no reduction in flight schedules needed.

"I wouldn't want bag match to be the [government's] entire program, but I think it would be a calamity if 100% bag matching weren't part of the program," said Arnold Barnett, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor of management science and chairman of the FAA team that conducted the 1997 study. He concedes that bag-matching "offers no protection" against suicidal terrorists, but says it would deter others while the government develops technology to screen all luggage. "If they're going to do bag match, they should do it for every passenger and not for people they just guess are terrorists," Mr. Barnett said. "We're not very good at guessing."

Of course, the government could require greater use of bomb-sniffing dogs, hand searches and the undefined "other means or technology" cited in the legislation. But dogs tire after a few hours' work and require skilled handlers. Hand searches are time-consuming, and the Transportation Department hasn't determined what "other means" might satisfy Congress. Standard X-ray machines, though widely used to detect guns and knives, can't be counted on to pick up explosives, experts say.

Some airline industry officials worry that the government is already running out of time to meet another deadline in the law: that 100% of baggage be screened with high-tech devices by Dec. 31, 2002. Currently, there are 161 of the machines, which can detect bombs and plastic explosives, at about 50 U.S. airports, although a study last month by the Transportation Department's Inspector General found most airlines weren't maximizing their use of the devices. The Transportation Department has estimated it will need more than a dozen times that number.

But only two companies are federally certified to make the devices, which cost up to \$1 million each, and one of them, InVision Technologies Inc., Newark, Calif., says it will need a federal commitment before it can speed up production beyond the current five to 10 machines a month. Mr. Mineta said his agency has consulted General Electric Co. about having the company produce luggage-screening equipment similar to the computerized scanning machines used in hospitals. "Nothing has evolved" from those discussions, a GE spokesman said. The FAA has estimated it will cost as much as \$5 billion to buy and install the machines, but so far, the Transportation Department hasn't determined how that expense will be funded.

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