

FAA might match luggage to fliers

By Alan Levin

WASHINGTON — Federal aviation officials might reverse government policy and require airlines to match checked bags with passengers. With officials struggling since the Sept. 11 attacks to increase security as swiftly as possible, the process known as "positive bag match" is gaining favor as an effective interim measure against terrorism.

Many experts believe checked luggage, most of which is not screened remains one of aviation's greatest vulnerabilities. At least one carrier has broken ranks with the airline industry and instituted matching on its own.

A change in policy faces opposition from some who argue that it wouldn't be effective in the era of suicide bombers. The airline industry adamantly opposes mandatory bag matching. Industry officials say it would be costly and cause flight delays.

"We don't think it brings anything to the security of the system," said Dick Doubrava, managing director of security for the Air Transport Association.

JetBlue, a small carrier, is matching bags to passengers, a spokesman confirmed. "JetBlue has the ability to track bags for people who have not shown up for flights," Gareth Edmonson-Jones said.

Sources familiar with deliberations at the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) say the agency is reconsidering its position on matching bags to passengers on domestic flights. No decision has been made, but the discussions reflect an urgent desire to tighten security of checked bags, the sources said. Ultimately, federal officials and airlines want to screen all luggages for explosives. But it might be 2 or 3 years before enough screening machines can be produced.

Bag matching is designed to prevent a disaster such as Pan Am Flight 103 over Scotland in 1988. On that flight, Libyan terrorists who boarded in Malta are believed to have checked an item containing a bomb through to New York. The terrorists exited the jet at the next stop, leaving the bomb.

Bags on international flights, which officials had believed faced a higher risk of terrorism, are required to be matched with passengers. If a passenger is not seated on the jet, airline employees must remove that person's checked bags before the jet can take off. Bag matching is not required on domestic flights. A commission led by Vice President Gore in 1996 initially supported the idea but backed off after airlines objected.

An FAA-financed study concluded there would be delays because of domestic bag matching. Airline officials and some within the FAA used those findings to oppose the measure. But the study's authors said the delays would average 7 minutes on one out of seven flights.

"Until the goal is met of having all bags pass through explosive detection, the alternative of having unaccompanied suitcases entering airplanes is too dangerous," says Arnold Barnett, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor and lead author of the study.

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