Study supports bag matching on flights

Report counters airlines' prediction of disruptions

By Alan Levin
May 8, 2000 USA TODAY

Domestic airline schedules would not be significantly disrupted if flights were not allowed to depart when a passenger checks baggage but fails to board the plane, a study says.

The security measure that matches passengers to their bags, already used for international flights, would delay one of seven domestic flights for an average of seven minutes, according to Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Arnold Barnett, the chief author of the study. The Federal Aviation Administration financed the study, but the report contradicts the agency's position that matching bags to passengers on domestic flights would be ineffective and disruptive. The airline industry opposes the idea. Delays would decrease as airlines and passengers become accustomed to the program, the study found. The study is based on a test of 11 airlines and 8,000 flights in May 1997. ''Our findings challenge the widely held industry view that (bag matching) would have grave impacts on domestic operations,'' the study says. It appears in the March-April edition of the academic journal Operations Research. A 1996 White House commission on aviation security stopped short of endorsing bag matching. A domestic program could cost airlines up to $300 million annually. To counter terrorism, many foreign nations require airlines to match bags to passengers. If a passenger fails to show, his or her luggage is pulled from the aircraft. Investigators say a bag that did not match a passenger aboard Pan Am Flight 103 held the bomb that destroyed the flight in 1988. U.S. carriers must perform bag matches on international flights. Security experts are divided on whether mandating bag-match programs make sense.'' I think (bag matching) is really an outdated approach,'' says Richard Doubrava, a security expert with the airlines' trade group, the Air Transport Association. Airlines favor the FAA's current security effort, which uses a computer program to identify suspicious passengers. Those passengers are then subject to a bag match. Their bags could also be screened by explosive-detection machines that the FAA has installed at more than 40 airports. Eventually, the agency hopes to screen all bags for explosives, but that is still years away. The FAA spends about $100 million a year on machines to screen checked luggage for explosives. Some groups, such as the Association of Flight Attendants, say bag matching makes sense until other screening systems are better developed.