

Lawmakers seek ban on laptops in airliner cockpits

November 3 2009, By JOAN LOWY , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Lawmakers are moving to ban the use of computer laptops and other personal electronic devices in airline cockpits to prevent another incident like the Northwest Airlines plane that overshot Minneapolis by 150 miles.

Sen. Byron Dorgan, chairman of the aviation subcommittee, said in an interview that his staff is working on a bill that he expects to introduce in about a week. He said he was surprised to learn after the Oct. 21 incident that the [Federal Aviation Administration](#) doesn't specifically prohibit pilots from using laptops, DVD players, MP3 players and other devices during flight except below 10,000 feet while the plane is taking off or landing.

The two pilots of Northwest Flight 188 told National [Transportation Safety Board](#) investigators that they didn't notice repeated attempts by air traffic controllers and airline dispatchers to contact them because they were working on a new crew scheduling program on their laptops. The plane carrying 144 passengers was out of communication with anyone on the ground for 91 minutes, prompting the military to ready fighter jets for launch and the White House situation room to alert senior White House officials.

The plane zoomed past its Minneapolis destination before the pilots were alerted to their situation by a flight attendant. By that time, the plane was over Wisconsin.

"We now understand from this flight at least that this can happen and there ought to be a more clear understanding by everyone in the cockpit that there is a national standard that would prohibit this and that they need to take it seriously," said Dorgan, D-N.D.

Delta Air Lines, which acquired Northwest last year, has a policy prohibiting the use of personal laptops by pilots during flight. The airline has suspended the two pilots - Timothy Cheney of Gig Harbor, Wash., the captain, and Richard Cole of Salem, Ore., the first officer - pending an investigation. The FAA has revoked the pilots' licenses, and the NTSB is investigating the cause of the incident.

Dorgan said he expects his proposal to eventually be wrapped into a larger aviation bill pending before the Senate. He also said he doesn't anticipate any opposition to the measure.

Sen. Robert Menendez, D-N.J., has also said he wants to introduce legislation to prohibit pilots from using laptops and other personal devices during flight, and several other senators expressed support for a ban at a hearing last week.

Dorgan said his bill will make an exception for "electronic [flight](#) bags" - laptops containing navigational tools issued to pilots by some airlines.

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