

In-flight phones: Others likely to follow FAA lead

November 1 2013, by Raphael Satter



A passenger checks her cell phone before a flight, Thursday, Oct. 31, 2013, in Boston. The Federal Aviation Administration issued new guidelines Thursday, Oct. 31, 2013, under which passengers will be able to use devices to read, work, play games, watch movies and listen to music, from the time they board to the time they leave the plane. (AP Photo/Matt Slocum)

The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration says it is relaxing restrictions on the use of smartphones and other electronics inside flights by American carriers. Passengers are still barred from making calls or

downloading data off a cellular network, but the OK on using laptops, consoles, e-readers, and other electronics at the beginning and end of each flight will come as a relief to many travelers. Here's a look at what may be in store for air travelers in the rest of the world.

WILL OTHERS FOLLOW THE FAA'S FOOTSTEPS?

That seems likely. Across the Atlantic, Britain's Civil Aviation Authority on Friday said it welcomed the FAA's move, noting that electronic devices were a fact of modern life and "naturally passengers want to use them when they fly." Still, it said that European authorities in Brussels would have the final say over whether to loosen rules across the continent.

One academic who has studied the issue said European regulators first followed America's lead in banning the use of the devices during takeoff and landing and were likely to follow America's lead again now that the situation had changed.

"American safety is regarded as a gold standard," said Joseph Lampel, a professor of strategy and innovation at London's City University and a critic of the current rules. He acknowledged that European regulators had become increasingly independent of their American counterparts, but said it still seemed likely that they would relax the restrictions, which he said "never made any sense."

There was no answer at the European Aviation Safety Agency on Friday, a public holiday in some parts of Europe.

WHAT HAPPENS IF NOT EVERYONE AGREES TO CHANGE THE RULES?

Conceivably, a passenger traveling from New York to London would be allowed to use a games console on takeoff but would have to turn it off before landing. If that passenger took the same plane home, he or she would have to turn the console off on [takeoff](#) but be allowed to use it on landing. It's a confusing scenario aviation officials say they're working to avoid.

"That's exactly the kind of situation that (the International Civil Aviation Organization) is trying to mitigate right now," said spokesman Anthony Philbin. "Our main concern is that we don't want to see separate regulations set in place in different places in the world."

Philbin said a group of international state and industry representatives is currently studying the issue.

HOW ARE INTERNATIONAL AIRLINES REACTING?

Airlines across the globe said they were still digesting the FAA's turnaround, but a few of them released statements suggesting they both expected and welcomed similar moves elsewhere.

Air New Zealand, the country's national carrier, said it seemed "probable that a similar approach will be adopted in this jurisdiction in time."

Qantas, Australia's largest airline, said in a statement that it was "always interested in regulatory developments that could benefit passengers" and would be looking closely at the FAA's decision. British Airways didn't offer an opinion on the FAA decision, but noted it had recently become the first airline to allow customers to use their cellphones as soon as the plane left the runway.

Virgin Atlantic said it would carefully study the new guidance, which it

said would give customers "a more enjoyable experience aboard."

German airline company Lufthansa, which has long championed the use of data services in the cabin, welcomed the FAA decision but said it was concerned that rules might now vary according to the airline or the destination.

"We hope these standards will be featured worldwide," spokesman Michael Lamberty said.

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