

Agencies differ on allowing in-flight phone calls (Update)

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Federal Communications Commission (FCC) Chairman Tom Wheeler testifies on Capitol Hill in Washington, Thursday, Dec. 12, 2013, before the House Energy and Commerce Committee hearing on cell phones on planes. As one part of the federal government looks to remove restrictions on making phone calls from airplanes, another agency is apparently considering its own prohibition. Wheeler told members of Congress that while his agency sees no technical reason to ban calls on planes, Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx told him Thursday morning that the DOT will be moving forward with its own restrictions. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh)

Just because it is safe to use cellphones on a plane, it does not mean that passengers should call just to say hello.

That argument played out across Washington Thursday as one U.S. government agency voted to remove its prohibition of in-flight calls while another considered its own ban.

The Federal Communications Commission voted 3-2 to start a months-long public comment process to remove its restriction.

"There is a need to recognize that there is a new technology," said FCC chairman Thomas Wheeler. "This is a technical rule. It is a rule about technology. It is not a rule of usage."

But the Department of Transportation, which oversees aviation, is not so sure that permitting calls "is fair to consumers."

"Over the past few weeks, we have heard of concerns raised by airlines, travelers, flight attendants, members of Congress and others who are all troubled over the idea of passengers talking on cell phones in flight—and I am concerned about this possibility as well," DOT Secretary Anthony Foxx said in a statement.

The DOT will consider its own ban as part of its consumer protection role.

Calls during flights have been prohibited for 22 years over fears that they would interfere with cellular networks on the ground. Technological advances have resolved those concerns, which is one reason Wheeler wants to repeal the rule. He also wants the airlines, not the government, to have final say on in-flight calling.



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But even Wheeler acknowledged the potential annoyance factor.

"I'm the last person in the world who wants to listen to somebody talking" while flying across the country, Wheeler told a House subcommittee Thursday morning.

The FCC proposal comes just weeks after the Federal Aviation Administration lifted its ban on using personal electronic devices such as iPads and Kindles below 10,000 feet, saying they don't interfere with cockpit instruments.

An Associated Press-GfK poll released Wednesday found that 48 percent of Americans oppose allowing cellphones to be used for voice calls while flying; just 19 percent support it. Another 30 percent are neutral.

Among those who fly, opposition is stronger. Looking just at Americans who have taken more than one flight in the past year, 59 percent are against allowing calls on planes. That number grows to 78 percent among those who've taken four or more flights.

Delta Air Lines is the only airline to explicitly state that it won't allow voice calls regardless of what the government allows. Delta says years of feedback from customers show "the overwhelming sentiment" is to keep the ban in place. American Airlines, United Airlines and JetBlue Airways all plan to study the issue and listen to feedback from passengers and crew.

Most Middle East airlines and a few in Asia and Europe already allow voice calls on planes. Others allow texting.

Southwest Airlines on Wednesday started allowing passengers—for \$2 a day—to use iPhones to send and receive text messages while on board through a satellite connection. The system will expand to Android phones early next year.

The nation's largest flight attendant union opposes allowing voice calls, saying cellphone use could lead to fights between passengers.

The Telecommunications Industry Association, the cell phone providers' trade and lobbying group, supports the change. The association notes that in countries that allow phone use, calls typically last one to two minutes and only a handful of people make them at the same time. Additionally, many of the calls involve checking voicemail, with no speaking by the passenger.

In both the House and the Senate lawmakers have introduced legislation ahead of the FCC meeting that would ban fliers from talking on cell phones midflight.

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