US officials at odds over cellphone use on planes (Update)

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This Oct. 31, 2013 file photo shows a plane passenger checking her cell phone before a flight in Boston. While one government agency considers allowing cellphone calls on passenger planes, another now wants to ban them. The Transportation Department signals that it wants to impose a ban on inflight cellphone calls, just two months after the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) voted to pursue lifting the current ban. The FCC regulates wireless communications, while the transportation department regulates issues affecting airline passengers. (AP Photo/Matt Slocum, File)

It looks like the U.S. government is more conflicted about cellphones on planes than most American travelers. Even as one federal agency considers allowing the calls, another now wants to make sure that doesn't happen.

Passengers—particularly those who fly often—oppose allowing calls in flight, polls show. In line with that sentiment, the Department of Transportation signaled in a notice posted online Friday that it wants to retain the 23-year-old ban on the calls. But the notice comes just two months after the Federal Communications Commission voted to pursue lifting the ban.

The Transportation Department regulates aviation consumer issues. The FCC has responsibility over whether the use of cellphones in flight would interfere with cellular networks on the ground.

FCC Chairman Tom Wheeler has said he wants to repeal the current ban, calling it restrictive and outdated. He also wants the airlines, not the government, to have final say on in-flight calling. He declined to comment Friday on the department's notice.

Echoing some travelers' concerns, the Transportation Department said it believes allowing passengers to make cellphone calls "may be harmful or injurious" to other passengers.

This is because "people tend to talk louder on cellphones than when they're having face-to-face conversations," the department said. "They are also likely to talk more and further increase the noise on a flight, as passengers would not be simply talking to the persons sitting next to them but can call whomever they like."

Some planes already have seat-back phones in place, but they are rarely used, it said.

The "concern is not about individual calls, but rather the cumulative impact of allowing in-flight calls in close quarters," the department said.

In an Associated Press-GfK poll three months ago, 48 percent of those surveyed opposed letting cellphones be used for voice calls while planes are in flight, while 19 percent were in favor and 30 percent were neutral. Among those who'd flown four or more times in the previous year, the rate of opposition soared to 78 percent.

Delta Air Lines told the government last year that 64 percent of its passengers indicated that the ability to make phone calls in flight would have a negative impact on their onboard experience.

The FCC has already received more than 1,200 public comments on its proposal, almost all of them opposed to lifting the ban.

"Nobody, absolutely nobody, wants to be the involuntary audience of another passenger's telephone conversation," one commenter said Friday. "It is the equivalent of torture to be forced to listen to the incessant prattling of a seatmate, compounded by the impossibility of escape."

Among the most ardent opponents of lifting the current ban are flight attendants, who worry that phone conversation will spark arguments between passengers and even acts of violence.

"Allowing passengers to use cellphones during commercial flights will add unacceptable risks to aviation security, compromise a flight attendant's ability to maintain order in an emergency, increase cabin noise and tension among passengers and interfere with crewmembers in the performance of their duties as first responders in the cabin," said Corey Caldwell, a spokeswoman for the Association of Flight Attendants, responding to the department's proposal. The association represents nearly 60,000 flight attendants at 19 carriers.

Congress, inhabited by some of the nation's most frequent flyers, is also getting into the act. Lawmakers are pushing legislation to require transportation regulators to implement a ban on calls.

"When it comes to cellphones on planes, tap don't talk," Rep. Bill Shuster, the Republican chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, said last week as the committee gave bipartisan approval to his bill.

The current FCC ban was adopted in 1991 based on concern the calls planes might interfere with cellular networks on the ground, but technological advances have resolved those worries. In 2005, the FCC cleared the way for airlines to begin offering Wi-Fi in flight.

Last October, the Federal Aviation Administration, which regulates safety, dropped its ban on the use of personal electronic devices such as tablets, music players and smartphones to send email, to text or to surf the Internet during takeoffs and landings. The agency said it is no longer worried the devices will interfere with cockpit electronics. However, phone calls during takeoffs and landings are still prohibited.