Investigators warn airplane computers could be hacked

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Boeing 737-700 jet airliner. Credit: Wikipedia/Arcturu

The same Internet access now available on most commercial flights makes it possible for hackers to bring down a plane, a government watchdog warned Tuesday.

The finding by the Government Accountability Office presents chilling new scenarios for passengers. The report doesn't suggest it would be easy to do, or very likely. But it points out that as airlines and the Federal Aviation Administration attempt to modernize planes and flight tracking with Internet-based technology, attackers have a new vulnerability they could exploit.

A worst-case scenario is that a terrorist with a laptop would sit among the passengers and take control of the airplane using its passenger Wi-Fi, said Rep. Peter DeFazio, an Oregon Democrat on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee who requested the investigation.

"That's a serious vulnerability, and FAA should work quickly" to fix the problem, DeFazio said.

The avionics in a cockpit operate as a self-contained unit and aren't connected to the same system used by passengers to watch movies or work on their laptops. But as airlines update their systems with Internet-based networks, it's not uncommon for Wi-Fi systems to share routers or internal wiring.

According to the report, FAA and cybersecurity experts told investigators that airlines are relying on "firewalls" to create barriers. But because firewalls are software, they could be hacked.

"According to cybersecurity experts we interviewed, Internet connectivity in the cabin should be considered a direct link between the aircraft and the outside world, which includes potential malicious actors," the report states.

The GAO released a separate report last March that determined the FAA's system for guiding planes and other aircraft also was at "increased

and unnecessary risk" of being hacked.

One area of weakness is the ability to prevent and detect unauthorized access to the vast network of computer and communications systems the FAA uses to process and track flights around the world, the report said. The FAA relies on more than 100 of these air traffic systems to direct planes.

More information: Government Accountability Office report: www.gao.gov/products/GAO-15-370

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