

FAA moving toward easing electronic device use

June 21 2013, by Joan Lowy



This Feb. 23, 2011 file photo shows United Airlines planes taxiing at San Francisco International Airport in San Francisco. The government is moving toward easing restrictions on the use of electronic devices by airline passengers during taxiing, takeoffs and landings. An industry-labor advisory committee was expected to make recommendations next month to the Federal Aviation Administration on easing the restrictions, but the FAA said Friday that deadline has been extended to September. (AP Photo/Eric Risberg, File)

The U.S. government is moving toward easing restrictions on airline passengers using electronic devices to listen to music, play games, read books, watch movies and work during taxiing, takeoffs and landings.

An industry-labor advisory committee was supposed to make recommendations next month to the Federal Aviation Administration on easing the restrictions. But the agency said in a statement Friday the deadline has been extended to September because committee members asked for extra time to finish assessing whether it is safe to lift restrictions.

"The FAA recognizes consumers are intensely interested in the use of personal electronics aboard aircraft; that is why we tasked a government-industry group to examine the safety issues and the feasibility of changing the current restrictions," the statement said.

The agency is under public and political pressure to ease the restrictions as more people use e-book readers, music and video players, smartphones and laptops. Use of electronic devices is prohibited when aircraft are below 10,000 feet (3,000 meters) because of concern they could create electromagnetic interference with critical aircraft systems. But evidence of the potential interference is murky.

Cellphone calls and Internet use and transmissions are also prohibited, and it's not expected those restrictions will be lifted. Using cellphones to make calls on planes is regulated by the Federal Communications Commission. There is concern that making calls from fast-flying planes might cause technical difficulties with cellphone reception on the ground. There is also the potential annoyance factor—whether passengers will be unhappy if they have to listen to other passengers yakking on the phone.

The Wall Street Journal reported Friday that a draft report by the advisory committee indicates its 28 members have reached a consensus that at least some of the current restrictions should be eased.

"It's good to see the FAA may be on the verge of acknowledging what

the traveling public has suspected for years—that current rules are arbitrary and lack real justification," Sen. Claire McCaskill, a Democrat and one of Congress' more outspoken critics of the restrictions, said in a statement. She contends that unless scientific evidence can be presented to justify the restrictions, they should be lifted.

Edward Pizzarello, the co-founder of frequent flier discussion site MilePoint, says lifting the restriction is "long overdue."

"I actually feel like this regulation has been toughest on flight attendants. Nobody wants to shut off their phone, and the flight attendants are always left to be the bad guys and gals," said Pizzarello, 38.

"I just hope they do the sensible thing and don't allow people to talk on their cellphones during flight," added Pizzarello, who flies 150,000 to 200,000 miles a year. "There are plenty of people that don't have the social skills necessary to make a phone call on a plane without annoying the people around them. Some things are better left alone."

"Before the age of tablets, I used to read a physical newspaper or magazine. Now I can do that on my iPad. If the FAA lets me leave my iPad on, then that's one less thing I have to carry," Pizzarello said.

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