

TSA to cut number of names on 'no-fly' list

By Chris Strohm *National Journal's Technology Daily* January 17, 2007

The chief of the Transportation Security Administration told senators Wednesday that his agency will cut in half the number of names on the government's "no-fly" list but cautioned lawmakers against requiring the inspection of all cargo being put on aircraft.

"To assure the accuracy of the no-fly list itself, we will shortly conclude a case-by-case review of every name on the no-fly list," TSA Administrator Edmund (Kip) Hawley told the Senate Commerce Committee during a hearing. "Working with our partners at the Terrorist Screening Center and in the intelligence community and law enforcement, this effort will effectively cut the no-fly list in half."

A TSA spokesman said the number of people who will be left on the list is classified. The spokesman added that it would be wrong to assume that half the names on the list were wrongly placed there. "TSA has worked with the Terrorist Screening Center to ensure that all the individuals on the list currently pose a threat to aviation," he said.

The no-fly list has drawn public and congressional criticism over the years for containing generic and repetitive names and causing inconvenience for innocent people.

Senate Commerce Committee ranking Republican Ted Stevens of Alaska said his wife, Catherine, continues to be pulled aside for secondary screening at airports because her name is similar to the folk musician Cat Stevens, who is on the no-fly list. The singer changed his name to Yusuf Islam after becoming a Muslim in the late 1970s.

Hawley said TSA will adjust the list within "the next couple of months" to contain the "bare minimum" of names that pose a threat to aviation. Hawley also said TSA plans to begin a new passenger pre-screening system called Secure Flight sometime in 2008. He said the program has been revamped to satisfy privacy concerns.

But Hawley said TSA does not want Congress to force the agency to scan and inspect all freight cargo being put on passenger planes. The House passed a bill last week to require all air cargo to be inspected within three years.

Hawley said any such requirement would provide "a very small incremental benefit of security" and take away resources that could be used for other layers of defense. "Anything that switches off the brain is a bad thing," he said.

House Democrats said the cost of doing inspections could be borne by the airlines. Hawley said TSA agrees that screening as much air cargo as possible is important, and the agency will work with Congress to achieve that objective.

He added that the total amount of inspected cargo recently tripled but said the exact number is classified. He also said TSA is conducting a test program to examine how best to screen cargo that is bundled on pallets.

Sen. Stevens said he would like to find a way to increase cargo screening without passing the cost onto the airlines. "I think every time we add a burden to the system, we further compress the ability of the American airlines to survive," he said.

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