

Aviation Security Plans Make Waves in Kansas

By BRAD COOPER
The Kansas City Star

The federal government wants to slap new security rules on private jets, prompting an outcry from Kansas lawmakers and the general-aviation industry.

The rules, proposed by the Transportation Security Administration, would apply post-9/11 security measures to larger private planes used by the nation's corporate elite.

Affected would be dozens of planes used by some of Kansas City's biggest employers. Among other things, the rules would ban certain carry-on items and require aircraft operators to match passengers to terrorist watch lists.

Critics say the hassle could very well take the comfort and expediency out of flying in a corporate jet and hurt the Kansas aircraft industry.

"Time value is the single most crucial piece that we bring to the corporate business world," said Ed Chevrestt, vice president and general manager for Executive Beechcraft Inc., which manages aircraft at Wheeler Downtown Airport.

"If you take that out of the mix, why would you want to own an airplane?"

But the TSA contends that smaller planes pose a real security threat.

As the risks associated with commercial planes have been reduced over time, "terrorists may view general aviation aircraft as more vulnerable and thus attractive targets," the TSA wrote in the Federal Register last October.

"If hijacked and used as a missile, these aircraft would be capable of inflicting significant damage."

Needed or not?

Since the 9/11 attacks, security measures have mostly been applied to commercial air service. Now the government is taking public comment on proposed new rules for all aircraft 12,500 pounds and above, including:

- A ban on the same carry-on items now prohibited on commercial airlines. This could include golf clubs, baseball bats, tools longer than 7 inches and firearms.
- Enhanced background checks for flight crews that include fingerprinting for criminal history searches. Pilots now undergo background checks, but this would extend to other crew members.
- Mandatory audits to ensure compliance with the security rules. Aircraft operators also would have to designate security coordinators and train them and the flight crew in security functions.

The comment period ends Friday.

Corporate pilots contend it's misguided to look for terrorists in corporate boardrooms.

Unlike commercial aircraft packed with hundreds of strangers, general aviation is tight-knit. Pilots know each other and are intimately familiar with the executives they fly.

"It's different for us," said Tim Bock of Overland Park, a corporate pilot for 15 years. "We know the people coming on board."

The concerns don't stop there. There's worry about how the proposals might affect emergency air service or even vintage aircraft.

Beechcraft, for example, handles planes for Children's Mercy Hospital and the Transplant Network, which transports organs for donation.

"When they need to transport somebody, you don't have a whole lot of time to go through these requirements," Chevrestt said.

But Glenn Winn, an aviation security specialist at the University of Southern California, believes the security measures are necessary.

Some companies are better at applying security than others, he said, which underscores the need for one set of rules.

"The private operator has been pretty free as to what they can do with the aircraft and who flies on the aircraft," Winn said.

Costs for Kansas

The TSA estimates that the new rules could cost about \$1.4 billion over 10 years, or roughly \$44 a flight.

The agency believes about 85 percent of the costs would be borne by aircraft operators, who say the extra lug would force some businesses to stop using aircraft.

And that would not be good news for Kansas, which made half the country's general-aviation aircraft last year.

The rules have grabbed the attention of U.S. Sens. Pat Roberts and Sam Brownback, as well as U.S. Rep. Todd Tiahrt, who represents Wichita, the epicenter of Kansas aircraft production.

All three sent a single letter last month to Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano, asking her to reconsider the proposal.

They said most of corporate aviation is made up of small or midsize businesses that would be consumed with the added costs. Without changes, they said, "the TSA proposal could make it nearly impossible for some aircraft to operate at all."

Winn disagrees. He doubts that commercial aviation will ever be competitive with general aviation. And he said executives will still need jets to help make deals.

"It's all money and convenience and business timing," he said.

In an interview, Tiahrt compared the rules to searching passengers of a recreational vehicle or a passenger car.

"For the first time in our nation's history, a private citizen will have to ask the government before he can use his own personal property," Tiahrt said.

"This is an intrusion into our personal lives."

He wonders where it will end.

"Do we have random stops on our highways to check RVs or vehicles that meet a certain weight class?" he asked.

The Kansas City aviation community has banded together to fight the proposal. A letter sent to Roberts detailed steps that the community has taken to ensure security around its planes.

Measures included investments in hangar security, installation of anti-theft security systems in aircraft, and hiring security to patrol remote areas of the airfield.

TSA spokeswoman Carrie Harmon said the agency is continuing to obtain feedback in hopes of developing a program that increases security by partnering with the general-aviation industry.

"TSA is working to enhance security to further minimize the possibility of large general aviation aircraft being used as a weapon or to transport dangerous people or materials," Harmon said in a statement.

Have your say

The Transportation Security Administration will take comments on the new rules through Friday.

Submit comments through the portal at www.regulations.gov, or fax them to 202-493-2251.

Refer to Docket No. TSA-2008-0021.

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