

FAA Pressured To Give E-Readers A Pass During Takeoff, Landing



The Federal Aviation Administration is under pressure to allow more widespread use of e-readers on commercial flights - including during takeoff and landing.

(NPR.org) - As the holiday travel season approaches, the Federal Aviation Administration is under pressure to allow more widespread use of e-readers on commercial flights.

Passengers can now use devices such as Kindles, iPads and Nooks while in flight, but not during takeoffs and landings. The FAA says it is studying the matter, but the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission and a U.S. senator say it's time to act. If you've flown in recent years, you've heard the flight attendant announce that it's time to stow those portable electronic devices - anything with an on or off switch must be turned off. And if you fly frequently, like Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Mo., you hear it a lot. Even the flight attendants get tired of saying it, she says.

"Many flight attendants have expressed frustration at how much time they spend on, 'Turn it off. We're about to land. Turn it off. Have you shut that down? Have you really shut it down? Sir, I've asked you to shut it down.' I think they are frustrated with that," she says.

So McCaskill - mindful of the frustrations of flight attendants and passengers alike - recently wrote the FAA, urging that it allow the use of portable electronic devices for "the full duration of the flight." McCaskill says the FAA's current policy on e-readers and the like is anachronistic.

"We really don't have any factual basis to support that they are a safety concern," she says. "I'm big on getting rid of regulations that make no sense, and I think this is one. ... It's just time we take a really close look at it."

We're not talking about cellphones here. Those are transmitting devices, and no officials are calling for their use just yet.

McCaskill's isn't the only letter the FAA has received of late urging action on e-readers. FCC Chairman Julius Genachowski wrote the FAA earlier this month, pointing out that mobile devices are "increasingly interwoven in our daily lives," that they are helping drive economic growth and boost U.S. competitiveness. The two agencies are working together to study the safety of the devices.

Commercial pilot Patrick Smith, who writes the Ask the Pilot blog, says the safety issue is more about physics than electronics.

"As I understand it, any electronic interference that can be caused by these devices is really negligible to beyond negligible, and all along it's been more about them being a piece of hardware and a potential projectile - not about interference," he says.

Smith points out that a number of airlines are now allowing pilots to use e-devices in the cockpit in lieu of those traditional big black bags of manuals and publications.

But another pilot, **Kevin Hiatt, who heads the Flight Safety Foundation**, says the FAA, while moving slowly on the issue, is right to be cautious. He says there are many different types of devices, as well as many different types of aircraft, so the agency has no choice but to conduct thorough testing.

"The concern is that we don't know with the Kindle or the iPad or the Nook or any of those types of devices just exactly what they might be emitting. Have they been turned off or turned on for airplane mode?" he says. "And the other part about it is: Have they been damaged? Sometimes when you damage one of those types of devices, it then alters the way it works and then it might be sending out something that nobody knows how it would affect the cockpit."

But critics of the FAA's go-slow approach say there has been thorough, if unofficial, testing by passengers who either mistakenly or intentionally fail to turn off their devices when told to do so by flight attendants, without ill effect.

The FAA would not comment for the record, but officials say they are bringing together all the stakeholders, from flight attendants to manufacturers, to figure out how to go forward.

McCaskill says if the agency doesn't adopt what she calls common-sense changes soon, she is ready to introduce legislation to force it to act.

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