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TSA NIXES DEC. 31 DEADLINE FOR 100% SCREENING OF INBOUND AIR CARGO

The Transportation Security Administration announced Oct. 4 that it will not set a Dec. 31, 2011, deadline for 100% screening of cargo on international passenger aircraft bound for the U.S. TSA said it reached this decision after careful consideration of industry comments and a thorough examination of the unique challenges facing international cargo screening. TSA will continue to work toward meeting the statutory requirement for 100% screening but has not set a new anticipated deadline.

TSA officials had testified at a March 9 congressional hearing that they were working to meet the 100% screening requirement by Dec. 31, two years ahead of schedule. TSA had proposed the accelerated timetable in light of certain threats as well as the considerable progress made by air carriers in screening international inbound cargo. Specifically, carriers were found to be screening a higher percentage of air cargo (about 80% as of August 2010) than initially estimated (about 65%), and many air carriers were already at or close to 100%.

At the same time, officials noted that screening 100% of inbound air cargo posed operational and policy challenges. TSA officials set out several steps they planned to take to meet these challenges, including recognizing high-quality national cargo security programs in other countries. However, in an April 2011 address to the International Air Cargo Association, TSA said the response to this idea "has been well below expectations."

In the meantime, TSA has intensified its partnership with U.S. Customs and Border Protection and developed the Air Cargo Advance Screening program, which uses advance shipment data to assess risk on air cargo transported into the U.S. from foreign locations, identify cargo requiring enhanced pre-departure physical screening protocols, and prevent the loading of high-risk cargo before it departs from an overseas airport. The two agencies are conducting a voluntary ACAS pilot program to collect data, refine targeting procedures and establish appropriate communication systems. This pilot was first rolled out for express cargo carriers in 2010, expanded to passenger air carriers and forwarders in September 2011 and will eventually be extended to all-cargo carriers as well. The Advisory Committee on Commercial Operations of U.S. Customs Border Protection (COAC) Air Cargo Subcommittee reported at an Oct. 4 COAC meeting that CBP and TSA have begun drafting a strategic plan that identifies key aspects of the pilot program and major milestones to move ACAS from the pilot phase into CBP regulatory mandates for data transmission and targeting protocols.

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