

PANEL REJECTS BAN ON AIR SHIPMENTS OF FIRE-PRONE BATTERIES

News / Airlines



A UN aviation panel Wednesday rejected a ban on rechargeable battery shipments on passenger airliners, despite evidence they can cause explosions and unstoppable, in-flight fires, aviation officials told The Associated Press.

The International Civil Aviation Organization panel on dangerous goods voted 10 to 7 against a ban, said officials who spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to speak about the vote publicly.

The United States, Russia, Brazil, China and Spain, as well as organizations representing airline pilots and aircraft manufacturers, voted in favor of the ban. The Netherlands, Canada, France, Australia, Italy, United Arab Emirates, South Korea, Japan and the United Kingdom, as well as the International Air Transport Association, a global airline trade group, voted against it.

Billions of the lithium-ion batteries are used to power consumer electronics, ranging from cellphones and laptops to power tools and toothbrushes. Tens of thousands of the batteries are often shipped on a single plane.

U.S. Federal Aviation Administration government tests show small quantities of overheated lithium-ion batteries can cause explosions that can disable aircraft fire protection systems. The explosions knock panels off the interior walls of cargo compartments, allowing halon gas -- the fire suppression system used in airliners -- to escape and dissipate. With no halon, a fire could rage unchecked and lead to the destruction of the plane.

The aviation organization, also called ICAO, is the United Nations agency that sets international aviation standards. It's up to each country to decide whether to follow the standards, but most do.

Angela Stubblefield, the U.S. representative on the panel, spoke in favor of the ban, as did an official from the International Federation of Air Line Pilots' Associations.

Opponents of the ban argued that the decision on whether to accept battery shipments should be left up airlines, the officials said. As the result of the U.S. testing, nearly 30 airlines around the world say they no longer accept bulk battery shipments as cargo, but many other airlines continue to accept the shipments.

The battery industry and companies that rely on battery shipments have long said that the problem should be addressed by cracking down on shady battery makers who don't use proper shipping procedures. Battery industry officials didn't immediately reply to a request for comment.

ICAO sent an alert to airlines this summer urging that they conduct risk assessments on how to safely handle the shipments.

The FAA tests have raised alarms in aviation circles worldwide about the battery shipments for at least the last two years. But confirmation that only a small quantity of overheating, or short-circuiting, batteries can create an explosion that allows halon to escape was only recently disclosed. Unlike other types of batteries, lithium batteries are more likely to experience short-circuiting if damaged, defective, or exposed to extreme temperatures. The short-circuiting leads to thermal runaway, a condition of continually escalating temperatures that result can cause a fire.

Halon is capable of suppressing flames from a battery, but isn't able to stop the short-circuiting, the FAA tests show. With the flames suppressed, the overheating batteries emit explosive gases, including hydrogen, that can build up inside a shipping container. Once an explosion dislodged the cargo compartment panels and the halon escapes, there is nothing left to suppress flames.

Earlier this year, the International Coordinating Council of Aerospace Industries Associations, led by aircraft makers Boeing and Airbus, urged a ban on bulk battery shipments on passenger airline, saying that continuing to permit the shipments is "an unacceptable risk." Airliners aren't designed

to withstand the intense fires the batteries are capable of creating, the council said.

Despite the extensive testing, it wasn't until earlier this month that U.S. government said publicly for the first time that the battery shipments are too dangerous to be allowed on passenger planes and that it would back a ban proposed by the pilots association.

"We believe the risk is immediate and urgent," Stubblefield, a Federal Aviation Administration hazardous materials safety official, said at a Department of Transportation meeting on Oct. 8.

Airlines flying to and from the U.S. that accept lithium battery shipments carry 26 million passengers a year, she said.

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