



Federal Communications Commission

FAQ: Increasing Consumer Access to In-Flight Mobile Wireless Services

The Federal Communications Commission is seeking public comment on a proposed rule to allow airlines to expand access to mobile wireless services onboard aircraft, and will carefully review input from consumers and stakeholders before taking any final action.

To clarify common questions about the proposal, the FCC provides the following Q&A on the issue.

Q: What has the FCC proposed?

The FCC has invited public comment on a proposal that, if adopted, would give airline carriers the ability to allow passengers to use their mobile wireless devices, such as cellphones, while flying above 10,000 feet. The FCC is considering whether advances in technology no longer warrant – solely on a technological basis – the prohibition of in-flight mobile phone use. This is purely a technical decision.

Ultimately, if the FCC adopts new rules, it will be the airlines' decision, in consultation with their customers, and consistent with Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and Department of Transportation (USDOT) rules, whether to permit Internet access, texting and voice services on mobile wireless devices while airborne.

The proposed rules would make clear that, as a default, the ban on operating cellphones on planes will remain in place. If an airline takes affirmative steps, and complies with applicable FCC, FAA and USDOT rules, they would be permitted to operate an airborne access system that would allow them to provide the inflight services they choose and give them a greater degree of control over cellphones than exists today.

Q. Does today's vote mean that passengers can now use cell phones to make calls in-flight?

No. The proposal is just that – a proposal on which we will collect and carefully review consumer and technical input before taking any final action. The proposed rules maintain and expand the existing ban on cellular service in-flight on planes unless the aircraft is equipped with new specialized onboard equipment. If adopted, airlines, consistent with FAA and USDOT rules, will ultimately decide whether to offer passengers these services – not the FCC – and how best to manage it, including whether to enable voice services.

Q. Does the Department of Transportation's announcement pre-empt the FCC's determination whether wireless mobile devices can be used on planes?

No. The FCC's sole role is to examine the technical feasibility of the use of mobile devices in flight. As the Commission researches and takes public comments on the technical aspects of this issue, the U.S. Department of Transportation, as part of their Aviation Consumer Protection Authority, will determine solely if allowing **voice calls** is fair to consumers. USDOT will begin a public process to consider the possibility of banning in-flight calls through notice and comment rulemaking.

Q: Does the FCC approve of passengers making phone calls on airplanes?

The FCC makes no determination about what the actual practice should be or will be on airplanes. Ultimately, if the FCC adopts new rules in the coming months, it will be the airlines' decision, in consultation with their customers, and consistent with FAA and USDOT rules, whether to permit the use of data, text and/or voice services while airborne. Technology exists that would allow airlines to elect to allow voice and/or data service. We understand that many passengers would prefer that voice calls not be made on airplanes.

As a default, under the FCC's proposal, the use of cell phones on flights would continue to be prohibited.

Q: Technically, how will this work?

If adopted, the new rules could give airlines the ability to install an onboard wireless access system that would provide the connection between passenger's wireless devices and commercial wireless networks, much like Wi-Fi service is provided today aboard aircraft to provide connections to the Internet and safely manage connections.

Q: So if the decision to use cellphones will be determined by airlines, what is the FCC's role?

The responsibility of the FCC is to make a decision as to the technical issues involved, not the behavioral issues. The technical question before the Commission is whether mobile devices operated on an aircraft with an onboard wireless access system (and operated subject to appropriate technical limits) would cause interference to terrestrial networks. Beyond this interference concern, it is the Commission's goal to put the decision of what kinds of wireless data services airline passengers enjoy inflight in the hands of the airlines. Whether an airline determines to allow passengers to use data services, texting, and /or to make voice calls from planes in flight will be determined by the airlines

Q: Why are you doing this now?

The FCC's current rules prohibiting use of cellphones on planes were adopted more than 20 years ago to protect against radio interference to cellphone networks on the ground. Technology that can be installed directly on an airplane is now available to prevent such interference and has already been deployed successfully in many other countries around the world without incident. This is purely a technical decision; it will, if adopted, allow airline carriers free to develop any in-flight phone usage policy they may wish, consistent with applicable rules.

Q: How soon could voice calling become a reality on airlines?

Ultimately, if the FCC adopts new rules, it will be the airlines' decision, in consultation with their customers, and consistent with FAA and USDOT rules, whether to permit the use of data, text and/or voice services while airborne. The FCC's proposal represents a step toward addressing consumer

demand for airborne mobile wireless. The Commission has asked for comments from the public on the issue before making any final decisions. But even if the FCC ultimately decides that increased use of mobile wireless on airplanes is permissible, it is up to each individual airline to allow voice calls in flight.

Q: Why would the FCC allow cell phone calls on airplanes?

Ultimately, if the FCC adopts new rules, it will be the airlines' decision, in consultation with their customers, and consistent with FAA and USDOT rules, whether to permit the use of data, text and/or voice services while airborne. The FCC encourages prudent judgment and good etiquette in the use of cell phones and all electronic devices on airplanes. However, that is not within the scope of the FCC's responsibility. The proposal provides the means for the airlines to decide whether to provide capability to access mobile wireless services and whether to limit such service to data and not voice calls. The Commission's effort is purely technology-based, and by default, unless an airline takes affirmative steps, the use of cell phones would continue to be prohibited.

Q: How will the FCC address safety concerns?

The FAA is the agency with the primary responsibility with inflight safety. However, the FCC is seeking comment on any public safety or national security issues that the Commission should consider.

Q: Which airlines would allow inflight calls if this proposal results in new guidelines?

Ultimately, if the FCC adopts new rules, it will be the airlines' decision, in consultation with their customers, and consistent with FAA and USDOT rules, whether to permit the use of data, text and/or voice services while airborne. It is the determination of each individual airline regarding whether to allow passengers to make voice calls from planes inflight. Some airlines may choose to deploy such service and others may not.

Q: Do you have to coordinate any of this with the FAA or USDOT?

The FCC works very closely with FAA and USDOT and will continue to do so through this process. The choice about whether to deploy such services would be made by individual airlines, consistent with FAA and DoT rules.

This should not be confused with the FAA's recent rule change on Portable Electronic Devices (PEDs): The FAA has determined that airlines can safely expand passenger use of PEDs during all phases of flight, and provided the airlines with guidance. The FCC's proposal relates to the use of wireless mobile devices inflight.

Q: How do I let the FCC know how I feel about this proposal?

Consumers may file comments in response to the Commission's proposal through the Commission's Electronic Comment Filing System (ECFS), available here: <http://apps.fcc.gov/ecfs/>. Consumers may also call the FCC's toll-free number at 1-888-225-5322 (1-888-CALLFCC).