



Federal Communications Commission

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

On December 12, 2013, the Commission will consider a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking to revise outdated rules and provide airlines with the ability to permit passengers to use mobile wireless services via onboard airborne access systems. 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 plans to invite 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, to communicate with cellular frequency equipment while flying above 10,000 feet. **Ultimately, if the FCC adopts new rules, it will be the airlines' decision, in consultation with their customers whether to permit the use of data, text and/or voice services while airborne.**

The proposed rules would make clear that there is no right to operate cellphones on planes as a default. If an airline takes affirmative steps, and complies with applicable FCC and FAA rules, they would be permitted to operate an airborne access system that would allow them to provide the service and give them a greater degree of control over cellphones than exists today.

The FCC is considering whether advances in technology no longer warrant – on a technological basis – the prohibition of in-flight mobile phone use. This is purely a technical decision; it would leave airlines free to develop any in-flight phone usage policy they may wish.

Q: Does this mean the FCC approves of making phone calls on airplanes?

Ultimately, if the FCC adopts new rules, it will be the airlines' decision, in consultation with their customers whether to permit the use of data, text and/or voice services while airborne. It does not mean the Commission has endorsed phone calls from airplanes. 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. Ultimately, if the FCC adopts new rules in the coming months, it will be the airlines' decisions, in consultation with their customers, about whether to permit consumers to use data, text, and/or voice services while airborne.

Q: Will airline passengers be able to use cell phones to make voice calls on flights?

Ultimately, if the FCC adopts new rules, it will be the airlines' decision, in consultation with their customers whether to permit the use of data, text and/or voice services while airborne. This is a decision to be made by airlines and their consumers. The FCC makes no determination about what the

actual practice should be our will be on airplanes. As a default, under the FCC's proposal, the use of cell phones on flights would continue to be prohibited.

Airlines, consistent with FAA rules, will ultimately decide whether to offer airline passengers these services – not the FCC – and how best to manage it, including whether to enable voice services.

Q: Technically, how will this work?

If adopted, the new rules could give airlines the ability to install an Airborne 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 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 airline.

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 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 will carefully review the proposed rule-making between now and December 12, and then invite 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 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 proposal would seek comment on any safety issues that are within the regulatory purview of the Commission.

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 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?

The FCC works very closely with FAA 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 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 mobile operations above 10,000 feet.

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

Consumers who want to comment on this matter can call the FCC's toll-free number at 1-888-225-5322 (1-888-CALLFCC). Additional options for comment become available following Commission action formally opening a public comment period, and will be announced at that time.