

Airline Anti-Smoking Drive Gains But Still Faces Strong Opposition

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When Gloria Saeks takes long airline flights, she often wears a surgical mask.

Mrs. Saeks has a respiratory condition that is aggravated by cigarette smoke. When the Dayton, Ohio, resident visited China in 1984, she coughed the whole time, she says. Her doctor subsequently identified the cause as smoke on the long airline flight over.

Many people, including those without health conditions, are becoming increasingly intolerant of smoking on planes. The skies "are the next big battleground in the whole anti-smoking movement," says Ahron Leichtman, president of Citizens Against Tobacco Smoke.

The anti-smoking drive has been boosted by a surprising and important victory in Congress. The House, despite heavy lobbying by the tobacco industry, voted 198-193 in July to ban smoking on flights of two hours or less. The action, which would apply to about 80% of all domestic airline flights, shocked even the bill's backers.

Signs of Growing Opposition

"This issue has a special emotional appeal to members of Congress in a way we hadn't counted on," says Susan Arnold, a lobbyist for the Coalition on Smoking or Health, an umbrella group comprised of the American Heart Association, the American Cancer Society and the American Lung Association.

While it's far from certain that the Senate will take similar action, the House vote underscores what many activists say is growing anti-smoking sentiment among airline passengers. An American Medical Association poll conducted earlier this year showed that 33% of doctors and 67% of the general public support a smoking ban on flights. Garry Shaw, president of a Seattle-based caviar company, suggests that airlines "put smokers in their own smelly room and close the door."

Consumer groups say they are receiving more letters from irate passengers complaining about smoke drifting from the smoking section. And the flight attendants' unions are stepping up pressure for a smoking ban, billing it as a workplace health issue.

Still, it is too early to throw away airline ashtrays. Many smokers are insistent on retaining the right to puff on airline flights. Some argue that a smoking ban could pose a safety hazard by encouraging surreptitious smoking in airplane bathrooms; others say it is an unwarranted attempt to control personal habits. Rep. Tim Valentine, a North Carolina Democrat, says the ban would create an "absurd situation" where people would be barred from smoking on airliners, but would be allowed to drink all the alcohol they want. Many airlines, however, reserve the right to refuse to serve people who are intoxicated.

The anti-smoking legislation faces a rough road in the Senate, where friends of tobacco hold important positions and a filibuster threat can spell doom for a bill. Kentucky Democrat Wendell Ford, chairman of the Senate aviation subcommittee and a supporter of the tobacco industry, staunchly opposes the ban. Sen. Jesse Helms, a North Carolina Republican, warns he is "working on a tombstone and will chisel on it 'R.I.P.' for this legislation."

Further, the tobacco lobby continues its considerable efforts to sway lawmakers. Last year, for example, the Tobacco Institute, the industry's trade group, handed out \$91,000 in honoraria to members of Congress, much of it in \$1,000 or \$2,000 fees for making presentations to institute members at their Tuesday morning breakfasts. The trade group also flew several members to Palm Springs, Calif., in January while the Bob Hope Golf Classic was being held there.

In addition, the Air Transport Association, the trade group for the major carriers, opposes the House-passed smoking

ban. "The airlines want to continue to accommodate both the two-thirds of their passengers who don't want to smoke and the one-third who do," says an association spokesman. Airport officials, meanwhile, dislike the legislation because it would compel them to deny landing rights to airlines that continue to permit smoking—or face losing federal airport funds.

Because of the uncertain outlook in Congress, some anti-smoking crusaders are taking different tacks. Mr. Leichtman, who has launched a "Smokefree Skies Campaign" from Boca Raton, Fla., is urging airlines to ban smoking voluntarily on half of their flights. "If there are six flights from Fort Lauderdale to New York, why not make three of them smoke-free?" he says. Air Canada, he notes, has banned smoking on some flights and gotten a good reception.

IF THERE are six flights from Fort Lauderdale to New York, why not make three of them smoke-free? asks one anti-smoking activist.

Officials at big U.S. airlines are skeptical of the idea. "If we could make money on it, we'd do it tomorrow," says Robert Crandall, president of American Airlines, a unit of Dallas-based AMR Corp. "But we've run the numbers many, many times, and we can't make them work out right."

A smoker himself, Mr. Crandall insists that while nonsmokers say they would pre-

fer nonsmoking flights, evidence suggests they wouldn't change their schedules to take them. "But smokers," he contends, "are adamant. They would wait all day to take a flight that permits smoking."

Similarly, Frank Lorenzo, president of Houston-based Texas Air Corp., which owns Continental and Eastern airlines, says he has "no plans" for instituting a smoking ban of any kind.

The Transportation Department also has resisted anti-smoking actions, pending further study, since the National Academy of Sciences last year called for a smoking ban on all flights. Some critics suggest that the department's stance may reflect Secretary Elizabeth Dole's ties to her native state of North Carolina. Secretary Dole says through a spokesman that her home state isn't a factor and that she wants more concrete scientific information before making such a significant decision as banning smoking on airline flights.

Anti-smoking activists cite aviation safety as a major reason for banning smoking on airplanes, saying careless smoking could ignite disastrous fires on airliners. But James Burnett, the chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board, says that while banning smoking on planes would improve safety, "it isn't a major safety problem."

Nevertheless, supporters of the ban contend it's just a matter of time before cigarettes are tossed off jetliners for health risks caused by "passive smoking"—the inhalation of smoke from the cigarettes of smokers. "The evidence is now clear that involuntary smoking is harmful to your health," says Kerrie Wilson of the Coalition on Smoking or Health, citing studies by the U.S. Surgeon General and the National Academy of Sciences.

No Problem?

Scott Stapf, a spokesman for the Tobacco Institute, strongly disagrees. He says reports on passive smoking reflect anti-smoking militancy rather than objective research. "Real-world tests have indicated time and again that there isn't a problem," he says.

But many flight attendants insist there is a problem. Juliette Lenoir, vice president of the 20,000-member Association of Flight Attendants, says the union's members are increasingly suffering from upper respiratory difficulties. "One woman (attendant) I know has had pneumonia twice and pleurisy once over the course of a year," Ms. Lenoir says. "Otherwise she's extraordinarily healthy. It's almost as though she's allergic to her job."

"The ventilation on today's airlines wasn't designed to take care of smoking," says Democratic Rep. Richard Durbin of Illinois, the prime sponsor of the House ban. "We are subjecting everyone in an aircraft to the possibility of endangering their health."