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Los Angeles Times

August 2, 1987, Sunday, Home Edition

SECTION: View; Part 6; Page 1; Column 1; View Desk

LENGTH: 1771 words

HEADLINE: A LAST GASP FOR SMOKERS ON AIRLINERS?

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BODY:

Last month, the House approved legislation banning smoking on domestic airline flights of two hours or less.

Celebration was light. For even if the measure survives the Senate, predict airline associations and lobbyists for cleaner cabin air, it will be little more than a prelude to the inevitable: a federal ban on all smoking on all domestic flights of any duration.

And within five years.

"I wouldn't be surprised if it was before then," a spokesman for one air transport group said. "But as my group is not supporting the smoking ban, that is my personal opinion and it must remain completely off the record."

On the record, however, are government health studies and voluntary innovations within airlines that indicate a clear trend on the long-smoldering issue of smoking at 30,000 feet:

-- The National Cancer Institute at the request of Surgeon General C. Everett Koop is preparing a new study of cotinine levels, the metabolized residue of nicotine, in nonsmoking flight attendants. Cotinine is measured through saliva tests and urinalyses, said study leader Margaret Mattson, and is a standard determination of the effects, if any, of passive exposure to smoke.

Mattson declined to discuss details of the testing. But in his announcement, Koop said one airline, which he did not identify, has agreed to cooperate with federal researchers.

"It's my suspicion that a young lady who works in the smoking end of a plane in the galley is probably 'smoking' three or four cigarettes a flight, just by inhaling the passive smoke," he said.

-- Koop's review was ordered five months after the National Research Council, an arm of the National Academy of Sciences, reported in 1986 that airline ventilation practices have created a situation in which "cabin air ventilation (is) in violation of the building codes for most other indoor environments."

Further, said the 300-page report ordered by Congress, the nation's 70,000 flight attendants are exposed to smoke levels similar to those of a person

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living with a pack-a-day smoker.

Nonsmoking passengers, it noted, need to receive 50 to 75 cubic feet of clean cabin air per minute if they are to negate the ill effects (sneezing, eye irritation, headaches) of exposure to cigarette smoke, yet they generally are getting only 7 to 20 cubic feet a minute.

The study "unanimously and forcefully" recommended a federal ban on smoking on all domestic commercial air flights.

-- Examination of in-flight smoking problems (including the safety hazards of bathroom fires and impromptu landings to settle fistfights among passengers arguing their smoking rights) has produced close scrutiny of ventilation equipment used to cleanse and circulate cabin air.

These environmental control units (typically three ECUs, or power packs, are carried aboard wide-bodied aircraft such as the Boeing 747) process outside air for cabin use.

Joe Schwind, a director of engineering for the Air Line Pilots Assn., contended that the units were adequate but were underused by airline captains who routinely turn down or shut down the power packs to save fuel. In the process, ventilation is reduced to the recirculation of stale air.

"If you're only looking at a 1% fuel flow decrease for a 747 over a year, it comes to quite a bit," said Schwind. "In the millions (of dollars)."

-- Four years ago, said Daphne Dicino of Phoenix-based America West airlines, airlines generally divided seats 50-50 between smoking and nonsmoking sections. "Now, on a 22-row airplane, the nonsmoking section is the first 18 rows," she said.

A spokesperson for another airline said that rather than stir up the majority of nonsmokers, more captains are "taking advantage of any situation to declare nonsmoking flights. A party of schoolchildren. One person who might have emphysema. It's a judgment call and we're seeing more and more exercising of that judgment."

-- Air Canada, which 18 months ago began offering no-smoking flights within its high-density commuter triangle of Ottawa, Toronto and Montreal, has made the 90-day experiment permanent.

Three months ago, Air Canada inaugurated optional no-smoking service on its New York-Toronto flights. The trial period ended Friday and the company (after reporting a 10% business increase for its Montreal and Toronto nonsmokers) is evaluating a continuance.

Jim Frazier, who was project director of the National Research Council study, has watched smoking become taboo in the full range of public gathering places, from elevators to hockey arenas.

"Look at the trends," he suggested. "Hotels across the country are offering no-smoking rooms, even floors where the rooms have never been smoked in and people serving these rooms don't smoke."

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"If you put that, and a helluva lot more together, you would have to say, 'Why not on aircraft?' "

In fact, said Frazier, throughout the course of the council's study, he found only one professional group with anything good to say about smoking on airplanes: the mechanics.

"They said if it wasn't for the yellow stains left by tobacco smoke," he explained, "they wouldn't be able to see where door seals were leaking."

The Tobacco Institute, a Washington group representing 11 tobacco companies, lost its battle against the recent House vote. But institute Vice President Walker Merryman is confident that pressures from tobacco-growing states will extinguish the bill's future in the Senate.

Studies written for his organization, he said, show that in-flight smoking poses "no hazard to passengers or flight attendants."

Quoting one of those reports (prepared by the R.J. Reynolds Tobacco Co.), Merryman said that a passenger sitting in a nonsmoking section of a U.S. commercial airliner "would have to make eight continuous New York-to-Tokyo round trips to be exposed to the nicotine equivalent of one cigarette."

But whether one cigarette or a carton, noted Mary Ellen Miller, health and safety director for the Independent Federation of Flight Attendants in Kansas City, smoke remains much more hazardous to the health of personnel for whom pressurized cabins are daily work places.

"We can't really choose where we're going to work on a particular flight," explained Miller, a former stewardess for TWA. "When you have a flight attendant stuck in a smoking section . . . you get light-headed, dizzy, nauseous and I've even had nosebleeds."

Pressurized cabin air, Miller said, quoting a January report in the journal Aviation Space and Environmental Medicine, is dry and thin and far from perfect to begin with. Carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide build up as the air recirculates, and cigarette smoke contributes both.

"If you think you're falling asleep more on airplanes, it has nothing to do with your age or the day's work," Miller maintained. "The bad air is putting you to sleep."

"Pilots used to tell us that if we noticed all the passengers were falling asleep to let them know and they'd turn up the Power Packs."

Ironically, the problem for flight attendants has been exacerbated by the emancipation of their work force.

Two decades ago, the professional life of a female flight attendant was four or five years. Careers were ended by marriage, pregnancy or wrinkles.

"Now the average age of flight attendants is 35, the majority will probably stay until their 40s and so we're looking at the first generation of flight attendants to be exposed to cabin smoke for longer than a few years," said Matthew Finuchane of the 21,000-member Assn. of Flight Attendants in

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Washington.

"I think (an airline smoking ban) is inevitable. And if the two-hour ban eliminates the majority of the complaints, if it goes in without a lot of wrinkles, the incremental problems of a total ban might be saved."

Robert Rosner, executive director of the Smoking Policy Institute of the University of Seattle, is another expert who believes that the coup de grace for smoking on airliners will come not from passenger pressures "but from flight attendants who have to work there."

The time is ripe, he said, for a transfer of corporate concern. If companies on the ground are providing smoke-free work places for their employees, he asked, why aren't airline companies?

"Even with the amount I fly -- and I have 300,000 miles on my frequent flyer program -- it's not going to be enough (exposure) to convince a judge or jury that I've been impaired," he commented. "But if one flight attendant with asthma or some other allergic reaction to smoke files one \$400,000 lawsuit. . . ."

'Narrow' Position

Rosner said his institute takes a "very narrow" position on smoking. It does not concern the health of smokers. "You see, we're not discussing the personal health of the individual smoker, but the public health of all those exposed to smoke.

"Sometimes, after a presentation, I'm asked if we would have objections to anyone chewing tobacco on an airplane. I reply: 'As long as people carry their styrofoam cups and don't splash when they spit.' "

Although the smoking arguments are relatively clear, a clean resolution remains somewhat clouded.

For example, which federal authority would endorse and enforce a solution?

The Federal Aviation Administration is responsible for safety aboard airplanes . . . but not the cleanliness of cabin air.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration applies air quality standards to restaurants, transportation and work places . . . but not to airplanes.

The Air Line Pilots Assn. has acknowledged sympathy for non-smoking air travelers . . . but the group says its prime responsibility is with flight safety and demands on airline captains. There is, said spokesman Henry Gasque, a deep concern that outlawing smoking will cause some passengers to smoke in restrooms and increase the risk of in-flight fires. And pilots don't see it as their duty to confront "passengers who figure it is their God-given right to smoke in a nonsmoking section."

All airlines are concerned with the health and comfort of their passengers . . . but if cleaner cabin air means higher fuel costs, will passengers sit still for resulting higher fares?

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Airplanes, all agree, have a smoking problem shared by only one other form of transportation: the submarine. In neither can travelers go outside for a smoke or open windows to improve ventilation.

Said Dan Smith, an executive of the Dallas-based Air Line Passengers Assn.: "If an airliner was on the ground and you had that density of seating with people drinking and smoking alongside 250,000 pounds of fuel moving at 500 m.p.h. . . . well, it would never be approved as a nightclub."

GRAPHIC: Photo, Unconcerned by health, industry lobbies claiming smoking on airliners is likely to be banned, sailor Keith Patton lights up on PSA flight.
ELLEN JASKOL

SUBJECT:
SMOKING; AIRLINES -- UNITED STATES; HEALTH HAZARDS; AIRLINE PASSENGERS

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