

29TH STORY of Level 2 printed in FULL format.

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The Boston Globe

August 27, 1989, Sunday, City Edition

SECTION: FOCUS; Pg. A26

LENGTH: 2007 words

HEADLINE: Flying the smoke-free skies;
Tobacco lobby fights efforts to extend smoking ban to all domestic flights;
PUBLIC HEALTH

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DATELINE: WASHINGTON

BODY:

The federal government's official view of smoking on commercial airlines is puzzling: It is unhealthful - and unlawful - for passengers to smoke on flights lasting two hours or less. But since smoking is permitted on longer flights, the government must feel that clouds of toxic, carcinogen-laden smoke pose no such risk.

Sixteen months after Congress launched a two-year experiment banning smoking on shorter flights, the evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of extending the ban to all domestic flights, if not to longer international flights where cigarette smoke often exacerbates the effects of jet lag.

Thus, the fight to extend the present ban, to be waged in Congress starting next week, is likely to become a watershed event in the rancorous war between smokers and their insistence on lighting up and nonsmokers and their demands for smoke-free air. Expansion of the prohibition would mark a major step in the growing movement toward greater restrictions on smoking.

The smoke-free-skies debate isn't the only major assault on the tobacco industry. It comes at a time when domestic cigarette sales are falling, and the trend toward limiting smoking in the workplace and public places is mushrooming. In Congress, there is now a bipartisan, bicameral "tobacco caucus" intent on curbing the leaf. And Sen. Edward M. Kennedy is set to introduce groundbreaking legislation next month that would further regulate the tobacco industry.

But in Washington, decision-makers considering specific legislation sometimes find political clout more persuasive than compelling evidence. And, given the power of the tobacco lobby, frequent fliers, whether they smoke or not, may be forced to continue inhaling smoke, at least for the foreseeable future.

However, public sentiment, which counts with Congress, favors greater restrictions. In polls, the flying public enthusiastically supports the two-hour

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ban and wants it extended to all domestic flights. Even among smokers, polls show, a significant minority are happier in smoke-free skies. The airlines would welcome such a prohibition. So, too, would the Bush administration.

But the airlines, nervous about competitive pressures, are fearful of moving individually. And the administration would prefer to have Congress incur the wrath of the tobacco lobby.

If the political will for action is lacking, there is no shortage of evidence, much of it new, that argues for an end to smoking on aircraft. Government health officials, for instance, estimate that frequent fliers, and particularly flight attendants, have a higher risk of contracting lung cancer.

Obviously, flight attendants are at greatest risk. Many of them, in their 40s with 20 years or more of service aloft, are beginning to show signs of chronic lung disease from inhaling smoke day in and day out. Government health officials estimate that they have the same elevated lung-cancer risk as the nonsmoking spouses of pack-a-day smokers.

Earlier this year, a new study added to the evidence that smoke from the back of airplanes is inhaled in nonsmoking sections. Indeed, in a tribute to the efficiency with which newer airplanes recirculate cabin air, the National Cancer Institute study found that nicotine levels were actually higher in some nonsmoking sections of airplanes than they were in smoking sections.

In addition to the risk to nonsmoking flight attendants and frequent fliers, pregnant women, children and passengers with asthma or heart disease are especially vulnerable to tobacco smoke. Another study, reported in March, found that nonsmoking women exposed to tobacco smoke are three times as likely to contract cancer of the cervix.

And now comes evidence that smoking in the cockpit may be a safety-related issue as well. Dr. Alan R. Kahn, a Cincinnati researcher and former Air Force flight surgeon, has compiled evidence showing that, at higher altitudes, increased carbon monoxide levels in the bloodstream from cigarette smoke may impair pilot judgment at critical moments. Cockpits were exempted from the partial ban that is in effect. At most airlines, the pilot decides whether there will be smoking in the cockpit.

Kahn, whose findings have attracted little attention so far from the government, suggests that some air disasters in recent years may have occurred as a direct result of such pilot impairment. Pilots seem to agree. In a 1987 poll of pilots by the Air Line Pilots Association, 62 percent said smoking hampers crew coordination and affects aircraft safety; 77 percent said cockpit smoking should be curtailed or banned outright.

So why are antismoking forces fearful that they might have to settle for legislation that would merely make the two-hour ban permanent? Because, with a critical Senate vote on the issue scheduled for next week, the tobacco lobby, with its clout, its money and, critics charge, its intimidating tactics, has succeeded in throwing the outcome into question.

"Certainly we would not tolerate the contamination of aircraft cabins by any other pollutant as toxic as tobacco smoke," Dr. Ronald M. Davis, the director of the federal government's Office on Smoking and Health, said of the industry's

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influence. Davis noted that cigarette smoke contains 43 known carcinogens.

At the Tobacco Institute, the industry's lobbying and public relations arm, officials are not yet ready to acknowledge that smoking is harmful to the health of smokers, let alone that it poses risks to nonsmokers. Gary R. Miller, the assistant to the president at the institute, asserted last week that such studies, to the contrary, are flawed in their methodology and erroneous in their conclusions.

Attempts to extend the smoking ban to all domestic flights, Miller said, "are scientifically unwarranted, and extremely unfair to passengers who enjoy smoking."

Significantly, the tobacco industry has some reluctant but nonetheless critical allies on the issue. Most obvious among these is the airline industry itself. With the exception of Northwest Airlines, which has prospered with its prohibition on smoking on all its flights within North America, economic timidity has prevented other carriers from opting for smoke-free flights.

Privately, officials at several major airlines said they would be delighted to have the government ban smoking entirely on domestic flights. Such a step would save them countless headaches in assigning smoking and nonsmoking seats, substantially reduce their cleaning costs and end what promises to become a costly battle with their flight attendants over the health risks.

But no carrier wants to go it alone. "This is a cutthroat industry, where competition for every single passenger is intense," one airline executive said last week. "A fraction of 1 percent swing in market share can sometimes make the difference in profitability."

United Airlines president Stephen M. Wolf, in a letter last April to then Surgeon General C. Everett Koop, said as much. Wolf called the present partial ban "non-ideal," but said it is a "pragmatic" solution "that recognizes the preferences of our smoking passengers and marketing realities."

But, in a hint that United, like its competitors, would welcome such a ban, Wolf added: "We are certainly in a position to conform to any national guidelines . . . should they be implemented on a domestic-wide basis by government rule."

At Delta Airlines, the issue is something of an embarrassment. Company officials are hard-pressed to explain why, for health reasons, they forbid their employees to smoke in company offices while refusing to extend the same protection to their flight crews aloft.

The tobacco industry's other major ally has been the Executive branch of the federal government. The Reagan administration found new regulations of any flavor so abhorrent that it rebuffed pleas from Koop that smoking be prohibited on all commercial flights. In 1987, Transportation Secretary Elizabeth Dole - spouse of tobacco industry ally Bob Dole, the Senate GOP leader - ignored a National Academy of Sciences study recommending that she issue such a ban. Instead, Dole ordered another study.

The Bush administration, wary of the tobacco industry, appears content to let

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Congress settle the issue. But at Health and Human Services and, perhaps significantly, at the Environmental Protection Agency, there is a new activism on the issue. After two decades in which "air quality" and "clean air" have been synonymous with outdoor air only, the EPA has developed a keen interest in setting indoor air standards. Only recently, EPA ruled that cigarette smoke is "a major source of indoor air pollution" and noted that tobacco smoke contains toxins that are regulated by EPA when they occur in outdoor air.

James Repace, the EPA's leading scientist on the issue, said in an interview last week that he believes the health risks to flight attendants justify an outright ban on smoking aboard aircraft. Those risks, which he said include "a significant cancer risk," and may include a heightened risk of heart disease, are "simply unacceptable."

Last June, Dr. Davis and other administration officials delivered congressional testimony on the dangers of passive smoke on airplanes. Their testimony, which was approved in advance by the Office of Management and Budget, all but endorsed a congressional ban on smoking on domestic flights. If Congress fails to act, then the Transportation Department may be forced to early next year when it receives the restudy Secretary Dole ordered two years ago.

What is more, President Bush himself is hardly in a position to stand in the way of this antismoking sentiment. Smoking is not permitted on Air Force One, following a rule Bush established on Air Force Two, at the insistence of his wife, Barbara, when he was vice president.

For now, though, the issue is up to Congress. But its resolve is open to question in the face of the tobacco lobby, which still wields enormous power. Among other things, the industry is the largest source of honoraria payments to members of Congress.

Two months ago, a House committee considered legislation to extend the ban to all domestic flights. But it failed on a tie vote, 25-25, when the tobacco lobby put together a coalition of tobacco-state members, conservatives and some members beholden to the billboard industry, which depends on tobacco advertising.

But Rep. Richard J. Durbin (D-Ill.), who was the first to push Congress on the issue two years ago, fought to have language inserted in transportation appropriations legislation to make the ban on smoking on flights of two hours or less permanent. It was to have expired next April.

Next week, Sen. Frank R. Lautenberg (R-N.J.) will seek to add language to the Senate version of that appropriations bill to ban smoking on all domestic flights. The issue appears to be too close to call in the Senate, but Lautenberg possesses considerable leverage: As chairman of the Appropriations subcommittee on transportation, he controls the Senate's "pork," the highway and water projects his colleagues seek for their states.

Lautenberg, by some reports, is intent on exercising his clout on the issue. But in addition to Dole, he has some powerful opponents from the tobacco states, including former majority leader Robert C. Byrd (D-W.Va.), as well as Sens. Ernest F. Hollings (D-S.C.), Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) and Wendell Ford (D-Ky.).

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If Lautenberg prevails, Durbin hopes that the House-Senate conference committee will accept who said she has never smoked herself, was told by doctors that she has the lungs of a two-pack-a-day smoker.

Connie Chalk, another nonsmoking flight attendant, who coughed repeatedly during an interview last week, said she has a chronic inflammation of the lungs from inhaling cigarette smoke aloft. After 22 years of flying, she said, "I love my job, I love to fly. It's my career." But Chalk, who has recently restricted her flights to short hops, said that if she has to work a smoking flight again, "I'll just quit."

GRAPHIC: PHOTO, David Suter illustration

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

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