

Private planes on TSA's radar

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USA TODAY file photo

Only two airports had more private plane departures last year than Long Beach Airport.

By **Thomas Frank**, USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — The Transportation Security Administration is planning a massive expansion of aviation security that for the first time will regulate thousands of private planes now flying with no security rules.

The new regulations, expected to be proposed in coming months, stop short of passenger screening, but would aim to prevent someone from flying a small plane, possibly packed with explosives, into a building. Authorities also worry about terrorists transporting hazardous materials or themselves on private aircraft, said Michal Morgan, TSA head of general aviation security.

The threat is real, said aviation-security consultant Glen Winn, former United Airlines security chief. Some small airports reserved for private planes "really don't have a lot of security," which would make it easy for someone to steal a small jet, Winn said. "There's a huge window that's open, and I do believe they've got to close that," Winn added.

Corporations and aviation groups are watching closely as the TSA prepares to regulate roughly 15,000 private planes that are seen as a convenient alternative to commercial flights. The planes fly in a network of 4,700 small airports — 10 times the number of commercial airports — that rarely have delays and often sit closer to city centers, said Robert Olislagers, executive director of Centennial Airport near Denver, one of the busiest small airports.

Security regulations could hamper some convenience, aviation groups worry. "The new security proposals must be workable and should strike the right balance between the need for security and for mobility," said Dan Hubbard, spokesman for the National Business Aviation Association, a trade group for businesses with

private aircraft.

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The new regulations, which would apply to planes that weigh more than 12,500 pounds, would most likely require measures such as checking flight crew backgrounds, parking planes in secure areas and inspecting planes, Morgan said. "We've worked very closely with industry to garner as much input with respect to what is operationally feasible," Morgan said. It is not clear whether passengers would get background checks.

Many but not all private operators already safeguard their planes. The new rules will "provide a standard of security for a community that doesn't have one right now," Morgan said.

The regulations come as Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff has voiced concerns about terrorists using private jets. The department has proposed doing background checks of people flying on private planes into the USA and is looking at tightening security for small airports and for businesses such as fuel dealers that operate on them.

Eric Byer, head of government affairs for the National Air Transportation Association, which represents companies that service business jets, said new security rules "will be a little bit of an inconvenience" but might draw some passengers who now are worried about private planes. "Having a program like this will make (private planes) even more secure," he said.

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BUSY RUNWAYS

Airports with the most private plane departures and landings in 2007:

Phoenix Deer Valley: 372,000

Van Nuys, Calif.: 358,000

Long Beach: 357,000

Falcon Field, Ariz.: 305,000

Daytona Beach, Fla.: 296,000

Source: General Aviation Manufacturers Association