

ATA plans to install Taser guns in cockpits

■ Weapons not yet OK'd by FAA produce a 26-watt jolt that can subdue intruders.

By Chris O'Malley
STAFF WRITER

American Trans Air plans to put Taser guns aboard all 60 aircraft in its fleet, but the deployment of such weapons to stop hijackers has yet to receive federal approval.

The Indianapolis-based airline has ordered 200 of the devices from Taser International of Phoenix.

The manufacturer will conduct a demonstration for pilots next week and is putting together a training program, said James W. Hlavacek, executive vice president and chief operating officer of ATA parent Amtran Inc.

"I think the only issue for us is how soon the FAA is going to allow us to put them in."

A Taser gun shoots a pair of darts trailing wires that fire a 26-watt jolt of electricity that contracts muscles and temporarily stuns the nervous system.

"The nice part about this is it is nonlethal, and it does not injure the victim. As soon as the electricity is turned off, there is no further damage," said Hlavacek.

Executives were concerned about inadvertent contact with crew members or peaceful passengers in the event the devices were used to repel an attack. Hlavacek said Tasers have been tested on heart patients and children as young as 6.

"That's why I liked it. I am not in favor of lethal weapons in the cockpit," he said.

The devices — one for the pilot and one for the copilot — will be installed only in the cockpits, inside boxes that require crew members to punch in a security code to open.

Tasers are the latest security measures that ATA and other airlines are implementing. To prevent an intruder from defeating the flimsy lock mechanism on cockpit doors, a steel bar has been installed inside the cockpit of each plane that bars the door from the inside, securely latching the door to the door frame.

Earlier this month, ATA also hired a firm to strengthen cockpit doors and the entire bulkhead that separates the cockpit from the passenger area.

"We think the Tasers are the final piece of the puzzle so that

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our customers are completely secure so that nothing is going to happen and that the aircraft will make it from point A to point B. It is reassuring to our customers as well as our crew members," said Hlavacek.

He would not say how much money ATA is spending for Tasers.

ATA also has been looking at ways to improve ground security. On Thursday, two additional security checkpoints serving ATA and other airlines were installed in Concourse B and C at Indianapolis International Airport.

"We think that's going to allow the (security teams) to spend a little more time screening because there were tremendous pressures to move those crowds," Hlavacek said.

ATA's announcement came on the same day that United Airlines said it plans to install Taser guns in the cockpits. United also said it is starting a training program for pilots and flight attendants, aimed at both self-protection and assisting passengers.

Both measures are subject to federal government approval.

The Federal Aviation Administration has been reviewing its rule prohibiting any deadly or dangerous weapon on scheduled passenger flights. Congress, which has been working to tighten airline security since the attacks, also could override it.

Other airlines also have been considering stun guns. Mesa Air Group, which operates America West Express and US Airways Express, announced last month it plans to train its pilots to use them. United pilot Herb Hunter, a spokesman for the Air Line Pilots Association, endorsed the stun-gun plan as "a good first step."

"We have supported a three-pronged approach: Keep the bad guys off the jets (through tightened security), strengthen and eventually replace the cockpit doors and put defensive systems for pilots in the cockpit," Hunter said.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.

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