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Non-Rechargeable Lithium Battery Shipments Banned on Passenger Aircraft

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The U.S. Department of Transportation’s Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and Research and Special Programs Administration (RSPA) today banned cargo shipments of non-rechargeable lithium batteries aboard passenger flights, saying these batteries pose a fire hazard when transported in the cargo hold of passenger aircraft. The Department announced, however, that airline passengers still will be allowed to carry on board and use, or pack in checked bags, personal computers and other consumer products that contain lithium batteries.

“This limited ban raises the level of safety for passenger flights,” said U.S. Secretary of Transportation Norman Y. Mineta. “Our recent research shows that non-rechargeable lithium batteries pose a special fire risk and are difficult to extinguish even when shipped in relatively small numbers.”

The Department will continue to study the safety of cargo shipments of other types of batteries, such as rechargeable (lithium-ion) batteries, on passenger flights to determine if further rulemaking is warranted.

RSPA, the agency responsible for hazardous materials transportation regulation, issued the ban due to concern over the fire hazard posed by shipments of non-rechargeable lithium batteries when shipped on airline passenger flights. The FAA will enforce the ban under its primary enforcement authority over transportation of hazardous materials by air. The ban goes into effect on Dec. 29, 14 days after publication of an interim final rule in the *Federal Register*, and will apply to all U.S.-carrier flights and those of foreign carriers into and out of the United States. The public will be able to file comments on the rule and RSPA plans to hold a public meeting on this issue, after which adjustments to the rule could be made if warranted.

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The hazardous nature of the batteries is due to the presence of lithium, which has electrochemical properties that make it highly reactive. RSPA and FAA, working with fire-safety experts at the FAA's Technical Center in Atlantic City, NJ, found that if a shipment of non-rechargeable lithium batteries caught fire in flight, current aircraft cargo fire-suppression systems would not be able to extinguish the fire. A single non-rechargeable lithium battery on fire within a cargo shipment would likely cause all surrounding batteries to catch fire and burn until the entire shipment is consumed. Burning non-rechargeable lithium batteries could result in molten lithium penetrating the cargo compartment liner or raise air pressure levels high enough to break through the cargo-compartment panels, allowing the fire to spread beyond the cargo compartment to other parts of the aircraft. FAA researchers also found that any fire in an aircraft cargo compartment -- regardless of location or cause, and even if suppressed -- could raise the cargo compartment temperature enough to self-ignite a shipment of non-rechargeable lithium batteries.

However, individual shipments of properly secured and packaged equipment containing small lithium batteries (e.g., a laptop computer) still will be allowed on passenger flights. Also, cargo shipments of non-rechargeable lithium batteries will be permitted on all-cargo flights.

The comment period for the interim final rule ends Feb. 13, 2005. A copy of the interim final rule is contained in docket RSPA-2004-19886 and can be found at <http://dms.dot.gov> and <http://www.regulations.gov>.

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