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Few pets experience trouble on airlines

Posted on August 5, 2013 by Adina Solomon



By Adina Solomon

Only a miniscule percentage of pets that fly experience an injury, loss or death.

Though statistics and data are difficult to find, *Air Cargo World* found that less than 0.01 percent of pets that fly have an incident. (This figure is based on U.S. airlines interviewed and U.S. Department of Transportation documents.) Even then, most incidents are due to a mistake by the pet's owner, says Marcel Brozius, director Europe of the International Pet and Animal Transportation Association (IPATA).

"Usually when something goes wrong and an animal passes away, it has to do something with either the animal wasn't healthy already going onto the flight," says Brozius, also owner of Zurich-based pet freight forwarder ACE Pet Moving. "Sometimes, owners give tranquilizers, which can be fatal because it interacts with their system. It lowers their blood pressure and so on."

Other times, the animal is too old to travel, he says.

A graph illustrating pet incidents can be found at the end of this article.

Tony Randgaard, United Airlines' manager of cargo marketing, says the airline transports more than 110,000 pets per year. In 2011, United reported two deaths, according to Air Travel Consumer Reports from the U.S. Department of Transportation's Office of Aviation Enforcement and Proceedings.

The incident rate for United is 0.00180 percent.

Alaska Airlines flies more than 80,000 pets per year, Alaska spokesperson Marianne Lindsey writes in an email interview. In 2011, the airline reported seven incidents involving pets, four of which were deaths, according to the DOT.

That means the incident rate for Alaska Airlines is 0.00875 percent.

“Yes, there are some instances of a pet being injured,” Lindsey writes. “In the context of how many pets we transport each year, the numbers are extremely low. In the few instances of injuries or deaths, these have been extreme situations and many of them due to pet stress, i.e. them chewing out of their kennel and escaping.”

Axel Heitmann, Lufthansa’s director competence center animals and perishables, says the airline transports 15,000 pets a year through its Frankfurt facility, which is where the majority of animals go through. Heitmann says it is rare for a pet to have an incident.

Only U.S.-based airlines must report incidents involving pets.

“If we have the slightest doubt that an animal is not fit for travel, then we would reject and we would not take it on because we don’t want to take any chances,” Heitmann says. “Of course, with all those precautions, it still can happen because traveling for an animal and for a pet, there are some stressful things happening.”

Air Cargo World looked at airline’s 2011 and 2012 incident reports from the DOT, the most recent reports available. Most incidents were due to factors out of the airline’s control, such as pre-existing medical conditions and old age.

Many reported injuries are a result of pets cutting their mouths by chewing their kennel. Many losses of pets were due to the animal escaping by chewing through the kennel or because of faulty kennels that separated.

“There’s some really poor material crates that you can buy where a cat, for example, can escape and once a cat runs, it’s almost impossible to catch it again, especially if it’s in an airfield,” Brozius says

On Jan. 17, 2012, a kennel bottom half came unsnapped and dropped off during the unloading process from an American Airlines flight. The dog inside ran free on the tarmac and was later found dead.

An American Airlines agent had accepted a snap-together kennel, a type of kennel that AA policy prohibits “since the plastic snaps are prone to failure during shipping,” according to the report. After the incident, the airline released advisories to all personnel, revised the live animal checklist with a more precise description of a snap-together kennel and updated its training lesson for live animal acceptance.

Air Cargo World was unable to interview American Airlines before press time.

In 2012, Alaska Airlines started requiring nut-and-bolt locks on kennels for animals traveling in the cargo hold, Lindsey writes.

Delta Air Lines’ incidents included a dog that “likely died of possible hyperthermia” on May 17, 2012 and a dog that died of heat stroke on April 28, 2012.

Two pet chinchillas died Feb. 8, 2012 after “they were mistakenly loaded in the baggage bin with a shipment containing a small amount of dry ice,” Delta reported. The airline responded by notifying all load supervisors of the incident, and new local procedures were instituted in Anchorage, the flight’s origin city, that the operations office must check that shipments with dry ice are not comingled with live animals.

Russell Cason, Delta spokesperson, declined to comment for this story in an email.

“Because pet transport can sometimes be a sensitive subject,” he writes, “we’d prefer not to offer an interview for this story.”

Of the 46 reported incidents in 2011, Delta was responsible for just over half.

When it comes to flying a pet, preparation is key to ensuring that the trip is as smooth as possible. Most pets travel on planes when their owners are relocating.

“Pet travel is still is a bit of a stress for the animal,” Brozius of IPATA says.

People interviewed say pet owners must prepare their animals as much as possible for flying. Get the travel crate or kennel ahead of time so the animal can become used to it. The kennel must also be large enough for the animal and have plenty of water.

Brozius advises to book direct flights whenever possible to reduce offloading and transit times for the animal.

Depending on the pet's destination country, it may need certain vaccinations. For instance, Randgaard says Japan, Korea and many European Union countries require special vaccinations for U.S. pets because those areas don't have rabies.

United, with the 110,000 pets it transports every year, has one of the largest live animal programs in the world, and has a dedicated 24/7 Pet Safe desk and 47 temperature-controlled Pet Safe vans.

Any airline or forwarder staff in the world that handles animals must take a course with the International Air Transport Association to learn the IATA Live Animal Regulations. Most airlines also require their employees to receive specialized training in pet transportation.

Heitmann of Lufthansa says keeping an eye on the pets' behavior is important.

"We need to observe when we accept them here for transportation that they are fit for travel," he says. "It's very important that they are in good health, that they're well awake, that they don't have any tranquilizers – which is not good for animals – that they can observe what's happening around them."

Lufthansa, which has multiple transport centers for animals, carries 110 million live animals per year, though only 15,000 are pets.

Heitmann says a veterinarian must approve animals to fly.

"If you compare that to the passenger airlines, we don't usually go to a doctor before and say, 'Well, can I travel to the United States on a 10-hour flight?'" he says.

Lindsey of Alaska writes that brachycephalic cats and dogs such as bulldogs have more difficulty with flying and are only accepted for travel at the owner's risk. The skull bones of brachycephalic animals are shortened in length, giving the face and nose a pushed-in appearance that can create breathing problems.

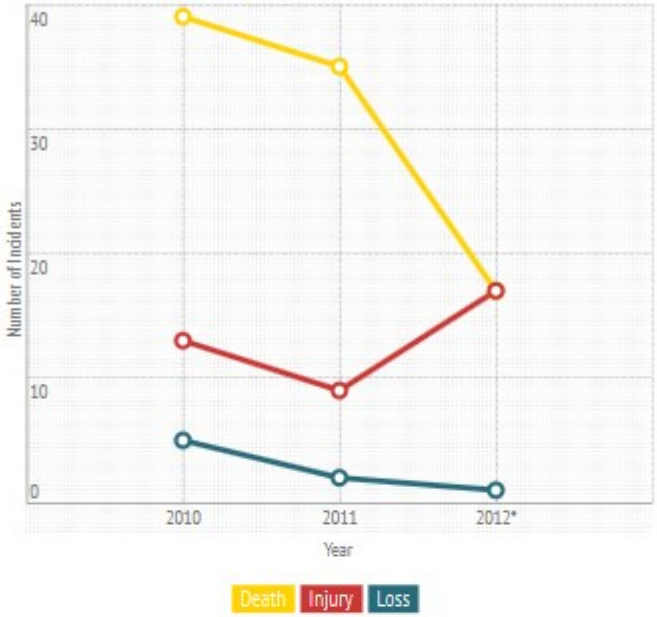
Though the Humane Society of the U.S. recommends people not fly their pets, Heitmann says air travel is one of the safest modes of transportation for animals.

"Compared to other modes of transportation, I think that the risks attached are rather low because usually the transport times of flying are, in a European flight for example, are usually less than transporting them on the road," Heitmann says. "Once they are in the air and then put in the belly of the aircraft, it's usually nice and quiet and not too much going on around them."

- See more at: http://www.aircargoworld.com/Air-Cargo-News/2013/08/few-pets-experience-trouble-on-airlines/0514792#sthash.Q1ynGcsg.dpuf

- (See the Chart on next page)

Pet Incidents for U.S.-Based Airlines



*2012 data only goes through July 2012, the latest month for which reports are available.

205,000

Number of pets United Airlines, Alaska Airlines and Lufthansa carry combined per year.

37

Percentage of United customers who travel with pets.

Less than 0.01

Percentage of pets flying on U.S. airlines that have an incident.

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