

United Airlines Cleared for Wi-Fi Onboard

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United Airlines, the world's second-largest carrier, received regulatory approval Monday to install wireless Internet access to its fleet in a partnership with Verizon Communications Inc.

The Federal Aviation Administration gave approval to United-parent UAL Corp. to install the cabin equipment necessary to provide wireless Internet connection to passengers and crew members on U.S. domestic flights. United becomes the first domestic airline to get FAA approval that allows passengers to surf the Internet while riding through the sky.

United Airlines and Verizon, which already provides airfone capabilities for the carrier, said it must still get approval from the Federal Communications Commission before the new service can officially launch. Both companies expect to have a date within the coming months, following an FCC spectrum auction where service rights and ranges of frequencies will be awarded to one or more onboard Internet access providers.

"Our research shows that connecting to the Internet is customers' most preferred form of communication to the ground, and this certification is a crucial step to bring this in-flight wireless access to our customers," said Dennis Cary, United's senior vice president-Marketing. "We are thrilled by this accomplishment and proud to lead the industry in North America with Verizon Airfone in this endeavor."

Wireless Internet access is broadly available at airports around the world, and has even begun to pop up on some international flights. Both Lufthansa and Japan Airlines are among a number that provides Wi-Fi for a fee.

Pricing for United's service - which will likely launch in about a year - has yet to be determined. Lufthansa charges international fliers a flat fee of \$29.95 for an entire flight or \$9.95 for a half-hour.

The FAA approval comes after both companies worked for more than a year to demonstrate Wi-Fi access will not interfere with a plane's operations. The approval currently applies to the cabin of United's B757-200 aircraft, as it was used to test the technology, and is part of a larger strategy to enable Internet access on board all United aircraft.

"Our wireless broadband system will require only the addition of an avionics box, a wireless access point and a directional antenna, making it the faster and more affordable choice for United and its passengers," said Bill Pallone, president, Verizon Airfone.

Shares of UAL - which currently trade over the counter following the company's move into Chapter 11 bankruptcy - rose 30 cents, or 17.4 percent, to close at \$2.02. Verizon shares fell 15 cents to close at \$35.02 on the New York Stock Exchange.

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