



The Dangerous Goods Nobody Told the Pilot About

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A cargo fire warning activates mid-flight. The flight crew carry out emergency procedures and prepare to inform air traffic control about the nature of the cargo, its hazard classification, and its location on the aircraft. They reach for the Notification to Captain (NOTOC) – the document that should contain this information – but find no records of the consignment involved. That consignment had been loaded at a transit station along the route and was never

captured in the documentation. Now, the immediate challenge is not just the presence of dangerous goods, but the absence of clear and reliable information.

This scenario illustrates a less visible but critical aspect of dangerous goods safety. While much attention is placed on ensuring proper declaration, packing and acceptance, safety also depends on how well the information for the dangerous goods is

communicated, updated and made available to those who need it most. Robust acceptance procedures are essential, but they are only part of the picture. Air operators must ensure that the right information reaches the right people at the right time.

Keeping the Pilot in the Picture

The NOTOC provides the pilot-in-command with details of the dangerous goods carried on board and where they are loaded within the aircraft. The document must be prepared before departure, verified after loading, and acknowledged by the flight crew.

However, in practice, gaps can arise at each stage of the process. Dangerous goods accepted as cargo consignments may sometimes be omitted from the NOTOC because of poor coordination between documentation, loading and load planning teams. For example, on multi-sector flights, dangerous goods transiting through an intermediate station may not be separately recorded at that location. On routes where such goods are infrequent, handling staff

may overlook required procedures, including obtaining the pilot's acknowledgement of the NOTOC information.

Each omission has operational implications. During an in-flight emergency, the flight crew's response depends on accurate information about the goods carried on board. This affects information relayed to air traffic control, and in turn, impacts the data given to emergency services waiting on the ground. To support a timely response, every dangerous goods entry on the NOTOC should include the relevant emergency response guidance so that flight crew can act quickly without having to search through reference materials while under pressure.

Equally important, when there are no dangerous goods or special loads on board, this should be clearly stated – either on the loadsheet or on a NOTOC marked accordingly. A missing document should not be mistaken for a "nothing to declare"

Cautioning Passengers: Beyond the Notice

Beyond cargo operations, similar challenges arise in managing dangerous goods carried



by passengers. Air operators are required to caution passengers about prohibited dangerous goods at multiple touchpoints: during ticket purchase, at baggage acceptance and again at boarding gates. The intent is to prevent items like fireworks, flammable liquids and corrosive substances from making it onto the aircraft.

However, safety notices are only effective if passengers actually engage with them. A warning that is skimmed over or an online acknowledgement accepted with a single click, does little to improve awareness. Clear, well-designed notices using pictorial examples of prohibited items are often far more effective than dense blocks of regulatory text, especially for passengers who may be unfamiliar with aviation safety requirements or who are not fluent in the language used.

Direct staff engagement is often where the greatest impact is made. A check-in agent who asks, "Do you have any power banks in your checked baggage?" is far more likely to identify a problem than signage alone.

That said, no single measure is sufficient on its own; safety touchpoints work best in combination, with each reinforcing the other. Detailed guidance on quantity limits or specific conditions can stay on the operator's website. Clear, concise, visible messaging on prohibited items should be prioritised at check-in counters or boarding gates, and supported with human intervention to turn these passive reminders into active safety checks.

Additionally, air operators should periodically assess whether their warnings are actually working. Passenger feedback, incidents involving prohibited items and regular reviews of notice content all help identify gaps and keep communications relevant as new consumer products enter the market.

When Something Goes Wrong

Should an in-flight situation arise, access to accurate and usable information is critical. The NOTOC must be readily accessible throughout the flight, whether in physical or electronic form, and allows key details to be quickly identified. Every second spent searching for information is time taken away from managing the emergency.

Where NOTOC documents are lengthy, relaying detailed information while in the air may not be practical. Providing a contact point on the ground – such as a flight dispatcher – can strengthen coordination and allow air traffic services to quickly reach someone who can provide the full picture. Emergency responders on the ground also depend on accurate and timely information to assess and manage the hazards they may face. When an occurrence may involve dangerous goods, air operators should ensure relevant information is shared with them without delay.

Guidance for Operators

To support the implementation of these requirements, CAAS has issued [Advisory Circular AC 92-4-2](#) on the Provision of Dangerous Goods Information for aerodrome operators and air operators. However, guidance alone is insufficient. Preventing dangerous goods incidents requires more than robust acceptance procedures – it requires information to flow reliably to everyone who needs it, at every stage of the journey. When information flows as intended, the safety system functions effectively. When it does not, even the best acceptance controls may prove inadequate.



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