

New rule would give breath of air

Amherst firm hopes its product will soon aid fliers on oxygen therapy

BY MATT GLYNN

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For people who need oxygen therapy, flying on a commercial airline can be costly and complicated.

They need to line up supplies of supplemental oxygen for each step of their trip, and the cost to them can sometimes exceed the price of a plane ticket. Current federal rules prevent passengers from taking their own oxygen cylinders aboard U.S. domestic flights, for safety reasons.

A proposed federal rule change would allow Amherst-based AirSep Corp.'s portable devices aboard commercial flights, making flying more convenient for people who need oxygen therapy while expanding the market for AirSep's devices.

AirSep's portable oxygen concentrator, called the LifeStyle, has been on the market for more than two years, but passengers cannot take it aboard domestic flights.

U.S. airlines vary in their policies about providing supplemental oxygen aboard planes. Some don't make it available, while others provide it for a fee and typically require advance notice.

Advocates of the federal rule change note that passengers have to pay for an oxygen supply for each leg of their trip, which can make flying too expensive for some people.

Plus, advocates say, passengers need to make arrangements for oxygen to be supplied at each step, creating logistical hassles. Layovers and flight cancellations add to the complexity.

Airlines also have to get involved in the planning and might even need to set aside seats to hold passengers' tanks on longer flights.

"It's very difficult for the passengers and very difficult for the airlines," said Joseph Priest, AirSep's president and chief operating officer.

The proposed rule change would broaden the market for its portable LifeStyle, Priest said. He declined to say how many of the portable units AirSep has sold; in a document submitted to federal officials in August, AirSep said it had sold



Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News

Joseph Priest, president and chief operating officer at AirSep Corp., holds the company's LifeStyle portable oxygen concentrator, which would be allowed aboard passenger planes if a proposed federal rule change is adopted.

"thousands" of the devices in the past two years.

AirSep sells the portable units, which weigh less than 10 pounds, through home health care companies for about \$5,000. Smaller versions of AirSep's units are in development.

AirSep employs about 330 people and generates about \$100 million in annual revenues, Priest said. Including its larger, stationary oxygen concentrators, AirSep has sold about 1 million units in the past

18 years, the company told federal regulators.

Supporters of the proposed rule change, including some U.S. senators, say it would give people affected by it more freedom to travel.

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