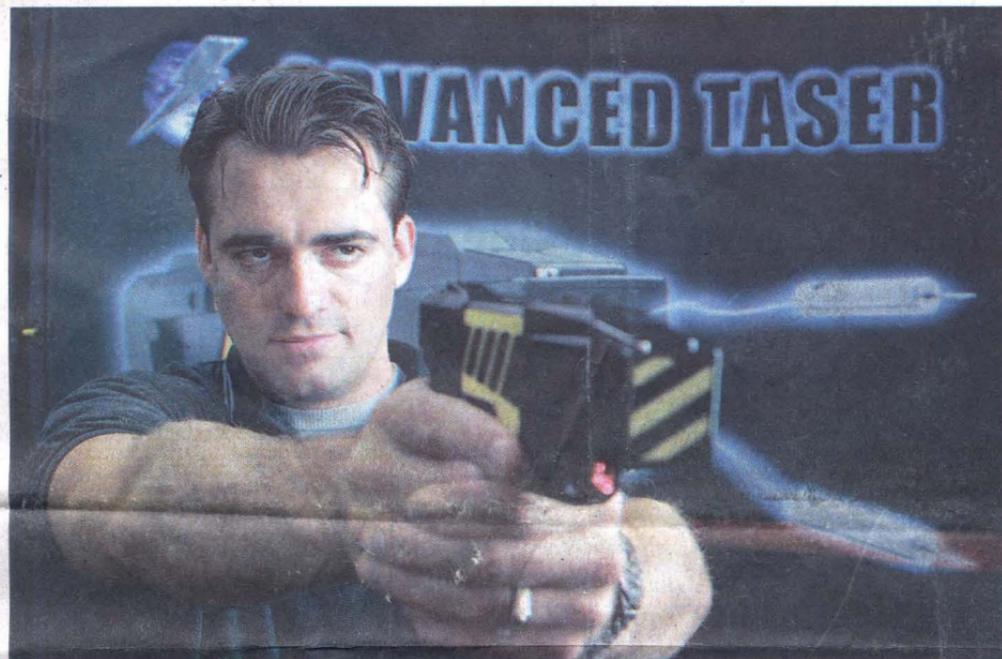


Shocking prospect



BRAD ARMSTRONG/TRIBUNE

Rick Smith, chief executive officer of Scottsdale-based Taser International, shows a stun gun that could be used on airliners. The firm has been in discussions with Mesa Air Group about providing weapons.

Planes may tote stun guns

Valley air company plans to arm crews to stave off attacks

BY DAVE WOODFILL
TRIBUNE

Mesa Air Group plans to arm its pilots with stun guns, making it the first domestic commercial carrier to issue self-defense weapons for cabin crews, the Phoenix-based company said Thursday.

The company has been working with the Federal Aviation Administration since last month's terrorist

attacks to establish storage and handling procedures, company spokeswoman Benet Wilson said.

Although the FAA hasn't approved the use of the guns, Wilson said the company will start training its pilots how to use them within 90 days.

"There's still no indication where (the FAA) stands," Wilson said. "We felt it was better for us to be proactive, however."

FAA officials could not be reached for comment.

A stun gun is designed to neutralize an assailant by

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TRIBUNE FILE

Among the planes flown by Mesa Air Group are the America West Express planes. America West Airlines stopped short of saying it would allow stun guns on those flights.

STUN: Company aims for guns in all 166 of its planes

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delivering a nonlethal, high-voltage electric shock. A stun gun that misses its target would not kill unintended victims or blow a hole in a pressurized airplane cabin.

Wilson said she didn't know much it would cost the company to provide weapons for each cockpit and train its pilots. The company plans to install the stun guns in its entire fleet of 166 planes.

One potential supplier of the stun guns is Scottsdale-based Taser International, which said it has been contacted by several airlines since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Taser CEO Rick Smith declined to name the airlines he has spoken to, but he said his company has been in discussions with Mesa Air Group to provide the weapons.

Smith said the order could be worth as much as \$100,000 to \$150,000.

"How we view it is that it will definitely be a significant order, regardless of the size because it's the first domestic airline to deploy Tasers," he said.

Some industry officials are skeptical of how effective a stun gun would be against determined terrorists.

"Clearly the stun gun would make the crew feel more comfortable, but I don't think that's the main issue," said Bill Oliver of the airline consulting

firm The Boyd Group. "Still, I'd rather see stun guns rather than (45-caliber pistols)."

Oliver said he would like to see the focus move from onboard weapons to real security improvements in the airport, including the federalization of passenger and luggage

screening.

Mesa Air Group flies to 120 cities in the United States, Canada and Mexico. It connects airports in smaller cities with larger airports. The company operates in the West and Midwest as America West Express.

Tempe-based carrier America West Airlines stopped short of saying it would allow stun guns on America West Express planes.

America West spokeswoman Janice Monahan said she was told that Mesa Air Group was going to work with

its partners.

"My understanding is plan are still in the works for Mesa so we'll see what happens, she said.

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